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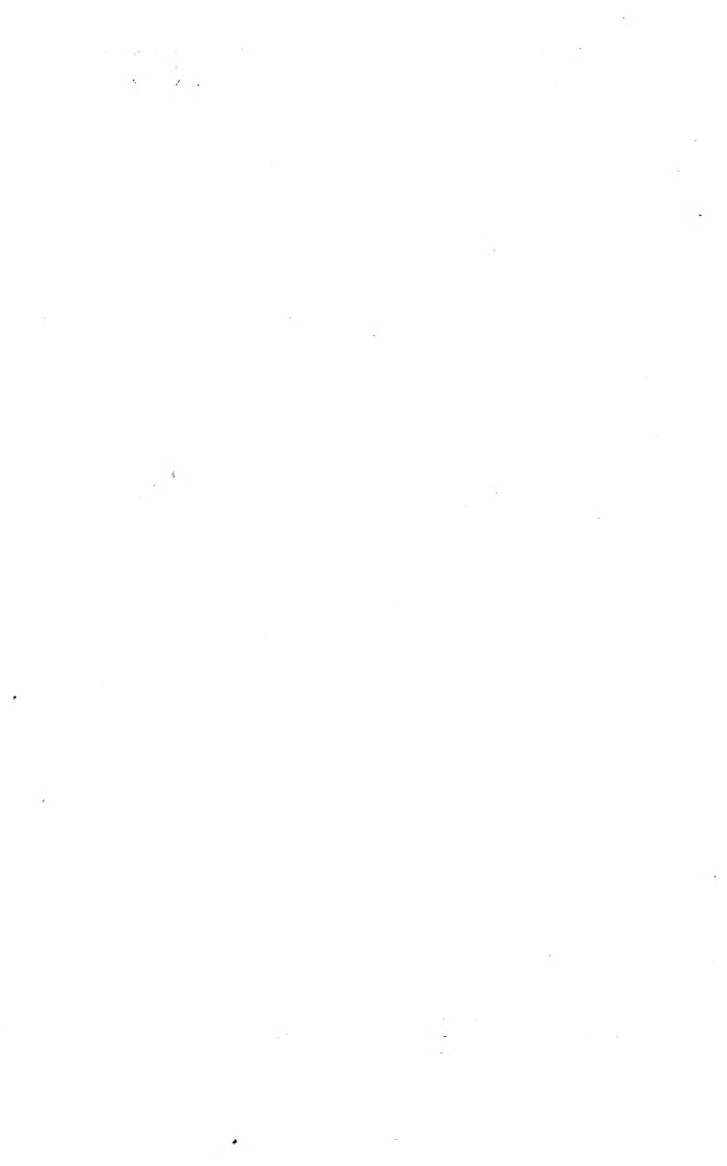
A SINNER'S SENTENCE

BY
ALFRED LARDER



IN THREE VOLUMES
VOL. I.

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A SINNER'S SENTENCE

CHAPTER I.

I AM in love again !—for the x th time. x , ladies, in algebra means an unknown quantity, and so it does here, for my little *affaires* have been countless since I was very small and very much petted ; and I liked it too, and I used to think of the warm kisses for days after in quite a Don Juanic manner. Of course I made proposals to two or three of the prettiest housemaids ; and, *mon Dieu* !—to use her own favourite expression—when we had a French governess, fine but fat and dirty, with a queenly presence and a coronal of yellow hair,

my heart was irretrievably lost. She called me a pretty boy, and my wicked young pulses used to thrill when she patronizingly put her hand on my upturned brow and gave me a kiss.

When a circus came with its overdressed tawdry lady riders, I would have bartered all my worldly possessions for a caress from their lips ; nay, I used to fall asleep dreaming of sometimes belonging to a houri like one of these. My girl-cousins were all fond of me, but there is an insipid, matter-of-course flavour about cousinly love-making.

Since then I have been in a chronic state of love with first one and then another, and to recount all my adventures *in puris naturalibus* would, I verily believe, put the 'Decameron' decidedly in the shade.

I have always found it so easy—so much easier, I should have said—to get on with women when you make love to them. The

most exaggerated respect, with yet a *soupçon* of tender *empressement* in your manner, will eventually subdue the most flinty-hearted old blue-stocking. Love, real or assumed, seems to flatter all women in their most susceptible spot. Even the engaged Angelina, to whom Edwin is all in all, is not averse to letting him see that other people like her besides himself, and therefore he must infer he is gaining a pearl beyond price.

It is wonderful how woman-worship, judiciously applied, will help you on in the world. Someone has said that every woman is a rake at heart, and upon my word there is ground for the saying. Even staid matrons, from whom any thought of actual sin is as far removed as the equator from the poles, are not averse to a little secret understanding, half-whispered confidences, and gentle pressures of the hand. It gives a zest to the dull religious round of life, this shadow of naughtiness. As

for the withered, painted, powdered *décolletée* hags who have been so much *en évidence*, mainly from little anecdotes and *on dits* which it is the grossest flattery to call piquant, when filthy would be so much nearer the mark, give me none of them. I cannot understand why men, when they want to tell and hear stories too racy for general publication, should enjoy them from the lips of some ancient scarecrow who is lost to all sense of self-respect and decency, and who, judging from the liberal display of her charms (?), would exhibit herself as Lady Godiva, had she but the chance, simply to lure on the knob-sucking, invertebrate, high-collared brigade of idiots yclept mashers. Go amongst your fellows, I say, laugh honestly, if you have a liking for the Rabelaisian of song and story. Picture your own mother talking in pronounced *doubles entendres*, and laughing shrilly at language or sentiment men ought to blush to use to the

other sex, and then tell me if that does not make your badinage less tasty.

In my salad days, though, I must own to rather more than a sneaking kindness for older women, well developed, and with enough knowledge of the world and conversational powers to put any gawky hobbledehoy at his ease. Then they kiss you with so little *arrière pensée*—you are only a boy—whereas, later in life, how you appreciate the coy blushes of maidenhood, and the caresses that have almost to be ravished from the hesitating, timid divinity! It is interesting to note how the green youth always affects women over thirty or so, and as he grows older and develops, say, into the Regent Street *roué*, he prefers female society as young as can be got. This is moralizing, but when Lothario sets to work to preach on feminine frailty, or the devil discourses upon sin, you will admit at least that he knows what he is talking

about, and that is more than can be said of all our callow curates, too often the fools of the family, and therefore considered fit for nothing but that rubbish heap, the Church.

A man I know—a writer, a novelist, and an authority on evolution—always tells me whenever I meet him that the story of everyone's life is interesting. That is a fact that remains to be proved, and I notice he never tries the experiment *in corpore vili*. I began once. I knew and loved—*horresco referens*—a barmaid. With all my susceptibility, I really had to decline entertaining the ideas of matrimony that were floating through her pretty little close-cropped and curled head. She was unreasonable enough to decline meeting me after this, and I was considerably *épris*, and therefore felt it a good deal. So, *inter alia*—the *alia* including a liberal allowance of Martinez port at Short's and the hired smiles of a siren from the depths of the Aquarium—

I commenced a history of my life. I kept at it for two days, until my wounded heart was cicatrized, and then incontinently gave it up.

The particular tryst my Hebe refused to keep was on a Saturday, and somehow or other, whenever fortune has been unkind to you and you especially need the rough but genuine sympathy of the male sex, all your friends happen to be out of town, leaving you the society of bores, or those men whose evenings are passed between the Gaiety bar and Darmstaetter's, with peradventure an expedition to the Café de l'Europe or the Criterion. Don't go to another woman for sympathy in your love troubles ; it is a bad compliment, and is sure to be resented sooner or later. Feeling something like 'Frank Fairlegh,' a gentle melancholy too sacred to be chaffed about, and too deep to be drowned in green Chartreuse, and depressed to a

terrible extent by that awful institution, our metropolitan Sabbath, which had more terrors than usual after my *coup de grâce*, as I lacked energy enough to run down even to Kew or Richmond, let alone higher up the river, I might be excused for giving way to the *cacoethes scribendi* and pouring out my woes on several sheets of Piries' best repp paper, which were the first thing handy, and which have long since been consigned to the flames. I cannot plead that now, except, as I said at first, I am in love again.

To prevent any misconception, I may as well say at once I am not a blue-blooded aristocrat—far from it. My ancestors did not come over with the Conqueror, or, if they did, they forgot to hand the knowledge down to their descendants. Extremes meet, and possibly if I had been a rag-merchant, or a day-labourer, and had made a fortune, I might suddenly discover the long-hidden fact—and the Heralds'

College seems wonderfully complaisant where fees are concerned. Still, I was not born in a workhouse, and one of my 'forbears'—his portrait faces me—was leech, or surgeon, or quack doctor, in the time of Elizabeth. As far as things went, I believe he was one of the Savile Row or Harley Street practitioners of the period, but the medicos of that time either did not amass colossal fortunes, or else the course of time, cards, dice, and the fatal three—wine, women and tobacco—melted my ancestor's fees considerably. South Sea Bubbles, perhaps, could answer for some of them.

Just now I am bewailing the mournful result of a little operation in Grand Trunks, which my *soi-disant* infallible friend, Doveraigh, of Lombard Street, had adjured me to enter upon as 'a dead snip, my boy'; for he is also a racing man, and his language is of the Turf turfy. How easy it is to be led astray, and, in some cases, how expensive! That

£50, that following his advice has cost me, would have financed a little run over to Paris. Perhaps it's as well, though : but could the Aspasia and Phrynes of gay Lutetia know what they have lost, they might gnash their teeth — unless Mr. Syndicate, into whose pocket mine and countless other people's money has gone, should betake himself over there and gallop through the proceeds of his astuteness more quickly than I should have done.

But this is digression. If I am to inflict this story upon the 'gentle reader,' and the girls who will read novels in spite of parental prohibition—that class of women to whom a writer of the introduction to one of Zola's works says that half of life is a sealed book (but if, indeed, it is, they show an insatiable thirst to unclothe that half), I ought not to make my *début* under false pretences, but tell as much as I can of myself and my pedigree.

To be brief, this Æsculapius of our family history is little more than a tradition, relying mainly for belief on a shield, on which is depicted a hand, and what is supposed to be a lancet, and the motto '*Inter utrumque vola.*'

My father is dead. As I remember him, he was old-fashioned and rather stately in his ideas—given to be Puritanical, and I fancy there must have been an intermarriage with the cropheaded Cromwellites. He always pointed out to me that I was not obliged to work for my living : or, as he put it, 'there is no occasion for you to descend to the tricks and chicanery of tradesmen and many professional men.' This is the kind of thing one's mind is very quick to absorb and act upon.

He professed Socialistic doctrines, inasmuch as all men ought to be equal, provided they lived and acted honourably ; but he by no means practised them, for, as he used to lament with a sigh, practical socialism is im-

possible outside Utopia. He was at issue with poets and thinkers on this question, and I remember well a favourite text of his for denunciation was Tennyson's hackneyed quotation, 'Kind hearts are more than coronets,' etc.

'Now, my boy,' my father would say, 'in theory, in melodiously flowing verse, the idea is beautiful; but reduce it to the level of everyday experience and common-sense, and it is the most unmitigated rubbish. Where on earth, except perhaps on a desert island, are good qualities equal, let alone being superior, to wealth and position? Of course, if you could get society at large to acknowledge the fact, all well and good, but as things are constituted in this world opulent vice takes the *pas* of virtue and rags, and, as far as I can see, always will. Not that I am anxious to counsel you to make friends with the "mammon of unrighteousness," but it needs either

great talent or immense wealth to make a successful reformer. So, as you have neither of these attributes to any conspicuous extent, act on the family motto, and be content with mediocrity. Rise above it if you can honourably, but have a care lest, like Icarus, you fly too high, the wax of your wings melt, and so you end with a catastrophe in which the last state is decidedly worse than the first.'

This advice I thought good, but with perpetual reiteration it became wearisome, and I was not sorry to leave home for Oxford, where in due course I took my degree, without any particular credit to myself or my college. The governor was inclined to wax rusty thereat, but, always consistent, he had to give in when I quoted back at him, nearly verbatim, his own words.

Fate had fixed him and my mother in a small country town, Slowford, in and around which most of his property was situated.

Many were the musty old deeds, referring to his possessions, he had in a capacious safe, and one day when he had incautiously left some of them about, a new servant annexed several of the parchments to cover jam-pots with, and 'the aforesaid messuage or tenement,' and 'whereas the said,' and 'the property hereby demised,' were removed to the store-closet. Poor man, this laches upset him for a week.

He was kind and good. He had his faults, but who hasn't? and *de mortuis nil nisi bonum*. Strait-laced as he was, we seemed imperceptibly to drift further apart ; for our ideas were so different that there was much less friction when we were separated, so I lived in London on a moderate allowance, eked out by my pen. No one, however, was more pleased to see me than my father whenever I visited the paternal roof, and it was his delight to chop logic with me by the hour together, and discuss the latest in the scientific and literary world, for

he always kept himself *au courant* with the march of events.

When he died I naturally assumed the reins, and had all the satisfaction to be derived from obsequious tenants and my own increased importance in Slowford ; for at the best the chamber-sheltered bachelor in town, however much ' side ' and style he may assume, is but a vagabond and a dweller in tents compared with even the small landed proprietor in the country. My father had had some objections to my reading for the Bar, but gave way, and I had been duly enrolled in the ranks of the great unemployed ; so having little to keep me in London at his death, I fell naturally into the grand seigneurship, and listened judicially to Hodge's request for a new roof, or Stubb's lament that his fence was so out of repair that his neighbour's be'asts had made havoc wi' his grass.

I was very popular, for I infused more modern ideas into the management of the property than my father, with his old-fashioned stick-in-one-groove ways ; but many was the long wandering tribute to his virtues I had to listen to patiently, and not without a suspicion of their disinterestedness. But the country grew irksome, the women were shy, or I, with my town-bred ideas, was not *en rapport* with them, and the only dissipation was to sit up to abnormal hours playing cards and drinking indifferent whisky, while I found the generality of the country people were essentially of one idea or one hobby, which they rode to death.

I yearned for the Strand—the vivacity, the *élan* of the Londoners ; for, decry them as you will, they are a great deal easier to get on with than country people. You may say they are artificial, that their friendship is on the surface. Possibly ; but in the North

the natives are habitually rude to you until they test your calibre, and even then I am always possessed of an idea that they are trying to get the best of you.

So I returned to the Metropolis with a larger allowance, partly the result of my own good management of the property, and here I am. I lay claim to twenty-seven years, and stand about five feet nine inches in my stockings; while the only thing I pride myself on are my eyes, which are nothing remarkable to look at, but to *le beau sexe* can be wonderfully expressive when I choose, and can flash out *œillades* that have often completed an only half-won conquest, and have burnt their way into the citadel of some women's hearts previously considered impregnable.

I could have married well, but liberty is sweet, and to be *au mieux* with some fair one and then to leave off the *liaison* before it palls

upon you, and to have tender recollections of Madame A. even while you are subjugating Mademoiselle B., are enough for any reasonable-minded mortal.

‘Holloa, Clifford ! we wondered what had become of you ; what in Hades are you up to now ?’ broke in on my ear, in hearty, manly tones.

‘Oh, nothing,’ I replied, trying to slip my MS. into one of the drawers in a magisterial-looking secretaire, which ought to have been covered with briefs, but wasn’t.

‘Nonsense, man, no evasions ; out with it !’

‘Well, if you will know, only a little calculation how many times I’ve repaid that confounded bill I got up behind for poor Vyner. Renewals and stamps together have just come to £70 more than the original £50, and then old Solomon says : “Bishnesh is sho bad, I am almosht ruined !”’

‘*Credat Judæus !*’ retorts Cecil Meredith ;
‘not you, this fine day ! Upon my soul it’s
poetry ! Pass it over. You won’t ? Then
here goes.’

There was a short sharp struggle, and I
laughingly resigned my MS. to the conqueror,
Meredith, my *fidus Achates*, a barrister in
some little practice, whose chambers were
below my own.

‘Why, what’s this ?’ he said, in amused
disgust, as he rapidly turned over the pages ;
‘a biography ? Is your brain softening this
hot day, or are you going to do Ballantine,
and write a book of reminiscences ? It’s no
use, old man ; *you*’—with a very unflatter-
ing emphasis—‘will never be famous enough.
He had to pawn things and go through all
sorts of anxieties, while your principal one
is what you shall have for dinner.’

‘And why shouldn’t I write one ? Didn’t
that delightful divinity in “As in a Looking-

Glass " keep a diary? I'm sure, by-the-by, I've met her two or three times, but she wasn't quite so nice as Philips pictures her.'

'A good thing, for she'd have turned up her nose at your pretensions,' retorts Meredith; 'but, come, put this literary effort away—midnight oil may lubricate the wheels of such an infernal Juggernaut—and come along with me. I have got a drag for the Eton and Harrow match, and the other Johnnies are waiting.'

'What—no women?' I asked, half yielding.

'No, and no lunch either; it is quite impromptu. We are going to be pirates, and board the other craft for provisions.'

'Avaunt, caitiff! I will not. Leave me in peace. Bertram told me he wrote a history of his own life, and it amused him intensely on wet Sundays. I am going to do ditto.'

'I suppose every man has a right to make an ass of himself,' muttered Meredith *sotto*

voce. 'So long as you don't inflict it on us, it doesn't matter. But you're not going to stay in this glorious day over that rubbish, surely?'

'I swear it by the laws of the Medes and Persians.'

Meredith stared at me as if in considerable doubt as to my sanity, and then departed in a blue fire of profanity.

CHAPTER II.

BUT, as I said before, I am in love. I thought I should desist for a time—really I did. Only a fortnight since I was trying to get up a tender interest in Mrs. Branscombe, for she was rather starchy to get on with, and I thought a little love-making would smooth the way and remove the friction—for she is not half bad-looking—when suddenly I discovered, to my amazement, and, I may add, horror, she was in love with me. I hate *esclandres*, or interfering with my neighbour's property, as a rule, though you might not think so. It was in this wise: Branscombe—and a thorough good fellow he is too—

asked me to see his *cara sposa* down to a confounded chamber-music matinée at the Prince's Hall, and a thing of all others I detest is classical music pure and simple. There are bits worth hearing, but you have to endure with an infinite amount of patience miles of dull, heavy, strained harmony, that to the uncultured ear is discordant, and would do better for a funeral, before you come to the gems that are worth listening to.

Maybe, people I have no doubt think, I am an uncultivated brute, but how is it that when Lloyd or poor Maas used to give for an encore 'Then you'll remember me,' or 'Let me like a soldier fall,' the applause was simply deafening, and music-lovers, *virtuosi* even, have I seen applauding to the echo. Why do Patti and Albani, on their recall, so often descend to 'I dreamt that I dwelt' or 'Home, sweet home'? Surely it cannot be all 'playing to the gallery'?

Well, as old Astley used to say, I must 'cut the dialogue and come to the 'osses.' I was coming back with Mrs. Branscombe in a hansom—a reprehensible proceeding—and we had had a little disagreement, and at its conclusion I laughingly offered her my hand, saying she ought to forgive me and be friends, when, to my surprise, she took it and held it, giving it more than one unmistakable squeeze. At the time I hardly noticed it. I am dense sometimes, but madame arranged a *tête-à-tête* a few days later. I had driven with her party to Richmond, and while dinner was going on she directed some glances at me that I knew from past experience meant a good deal, for when eyes meet there is a subtle magnetism—or shall I say telepathy?—without any outward signs or motion of the features.

Presently, strolling in the Park, Mrs. Branscombe said to me :

‘ Oh, do let us turn down here to avoid that frivolous lot. Somehow, their noisy laughter seems out of place amongst this delicious repose and beauty. Let us be in the country in real earnest.’

We turned off accordingly, and, walking along, I noticed a most curious constraint, combined with a total absence of her ordinary polite stiffness, on the part of my companion. Rashly, and without thinking, I threw out a soft nothing as an affectionate feeler, almost as one might remark on the weather, and she grasped it with avidity. What could I do but follow it up with a pretty sentiment and a compliment to my fair friend ! This was seed on good ground with a vengeance, and when a woman wants to be made love to, what can you do but yield to her wishes ? And I fell into the trap *sur le champ*, and in less than two minutes I was playing Lovelace to the life.

Mrs. Branscombe said in response to an inquiry of mine :

‘ You oughtn’t to ask me if I care for you,’ when her very accents answered the question. Things grew worse, but luckily someone interrupted us, and only on the walk back were we together alone. She had a tender tremulousness, and altogether there was thunder in the air, an implied but not expressed feeling that if her husband knew he would kill her. Then I was treated to some gentle abuse of Mr. Branscombe. He did not appreciate her, they were not fitted for one another, and if she had only known, and so on, *ad nauseam*.

Now, what was to be done? Was I to suggest an elopement to her, a thing I would not be involved in for the world?—and I by no means loved her sufficiently to spoil her and my own life, and risk her husband’s deadly enmity. I tried to temporize, and did my

best ; but in vain, for although I am always sure of my card for her evenings, I know full well from her icily kind and studiously polite treatment that she has not forgotten how she betrayed herself, and, though she relies on my honour, she has never forgiven me.

All this is by the way, though. It is my latest *amourette* that threatens to prove troublesome in many respects. For the last twelve months I have been engaged.

It happened in this wise : When I first came up to town my introductions provided me with plenty of pleasant society, always open to that much-sought-after individual, the bachelor, even if he be to a certain extent a detrimental. At Oxford I fell into the common error of thinking it guided the world, and that our opinions represented, if they did not originate, those of London itself. Perhaps I was too deeply imbued with this

idea, for I found myself at first out of touch with the cosmopolitan world of thought that exists there, and, perhaps from a too sedulous pursuit of sundry barmaids, I was by no means at home with the more cultivated women I met. However, I was always a strong adherent to Danton's maxim, '*L'audace, de l'audace, et toujours l'audace,*' and if I made advances to the fair sex, it was always the biggest craft I attacked first.

In our set the reigning beauty was a Miss Haviland, one of those creatures 'much too bright and good for human nature's daily food.' She was aware of her beauty, but too high-minded, shall I say?—idiotic, I thought—to use it for any unworthy ends. There was no suspicion of the coquette about her. She was commanding, brilliant, clever, educated beyond the ordinary run, religious without being a prig—in a word, perfection. Wherever she went she shone supreme, always the principal

star amidst a galaxy of admirers, and these always of the most intellectual and best sort. Any other woman seemed invertebrate and silly after her grand presence.

Miss Haviland was one of those women whom men always praise and worship and run after, but seldom marry (except for money, and she was an heiress), and their end is generally blue-stockingsdom or philanthropy. She had not a single fault, and men are prone to choose an erring mortal for a life-partner. The prospect of perfection always beside you, judging your peccadilloes from her own lofty standpoint, is not an alluring one.

When I first met her, I thought she pitied me for my mental inferiority. That piqued me, and I determined on making the haughty beauty acknowledge some day that I was dear to her. Progress was slow, but none the less certain. I worshipped silently in great humility ; every little attention I could show,

every little desire of hers I could anticipate, was like a little step cut in the ice of an enormous glacier. I was as devoted as a slave, and my influence, aided by the imploring glances I used to throw into her clear, radiant eyes, gradually gained ground. I used to think of myself as a heathen devotee worshipping adoringly, but mutely, at his idol's feet.

I kissed her hand—it was a long time before I ventured on that familiarity—and the cold, half-amused, queenly smile she gave showed at what a lofty height above me she considered herself, and would have daunted many a man less keen than I was. She had, I should mention, no near relations living, and her trustees were old, severely respectable, and the last people in the world to exercise any control over her.

One night, on leaving the house where I had first met Miss Haviland, I said good-

night in a recess sheltered behind some palms. She liked me, I knew, and gave me both her hands at parting, telling me to be sure and come on the following Sunday night. I took them reverently, held them half tremblingly in my own a second, and, putting all the eloquence of my nature into one look, I almost imperceptibly drew her towards me. 'May I?' my lips hardly uttered, and the reply was speedy. Quick of perception, she came nearer to me, just touched my lips in the lightest of caresses, said 'Good-night,' and was gone. With pulses throbbing more with elation at my growing success than any deep affection, I traversed a good part of Tyburnia in the thinnest of shoes and evening clothes before I remembered to hail a cab.

That little link, that merest trifle of understanding, cheered me on amazingly, and some time afterwards I called and found Blanche Haviland in tears about some serious trouble.

Not very promising, one would think ; but when she was alone, I promptly assumed the *rôle* of Barnabas the consoler, and I have been told I can do it very effectively. Sympathizing pressures of the hand, tender, brotherly words, and kindness such as the serpent showed Eve ; and before I left I had actually had that imperial head reposing on my breast for one brief instant, until the thought struck her that it was not proper.

My suit prospered by leaps and bounds after this. It was not long before Miss Haviland, held closely in my arms, confessed that she loved me, and when she said a thing she meant it. Marriage was by no means a part of my programme, and providentially my income at that time rendered it out of the question ; so she vowed tearfully she would wait—for my stately divinity could weep a few tears when moved by the tender passion—and I, with protestations that were far too

eager to be genuine, declared my intention of endeavouring to get into practice at once. My first step towards such a proceeding was to have a 'punch,' as the French say, and enliven myself with the company of some of the choicest spirits I knew; for now the crowning-point of my triumph had come, I felt no exultation whatever, but rather an uncomfortable sense of insincerity and having behaved badly, for I did not really want to marry Blanche.

Still, she was a splendid match, pecuniarily speaking, and I philosophically reflected I should have to conjugate *se ranger* some time, and matrimony did not seem to be wanting in pleasures of a masculine sort, judging from certain Benedicks of my acquaintance, who played higher, drank harder, and flirted more assiduously than many of the single ones. A cabman told me once that the last omnibus from Piccadilly westward at night was called

the 'husbands' bus,' so apparently the tendency of matrimonial fetters to be irksome is not confined to any one class.

However, I began to enjoy the attachment, slight as my affection was. I was always sure of a tender welcome from Blanche Haviland whenever I sought it. She was older than myself, and, being strong-willed, had a standard of right and wrong of her own, and when it was that *versus* propriety, propriety went to the wall. Briefs did not come in, for I never troubled myself about them, and sometimes I found it an awful relief to get away from Blanche's overwhelming perfection and find some less precise companionship.

Our intimacy drifted steadily along until the death of my father, which, while it compelled me to make definite proposals to Blanche, also gave me a respite for a time for which I was not a little thankful. Still, I am engaged now in real earnest, and I

can no longer pursue my old pastime—at least, with Blanche near. We are asked out together, and my beloved tells me how her friends remark what a capital pair we make. This state of things has considerable disadvantages as well as advantages, the latter consisting mainly of *tête-à-têtes* of inordinate length and loving liberties, which, once taken, become your right, and consequently lose all piquancy. It is hard to be tied down; and when you do attempt to get up little love-passages with other women, for them to smile at you as if you were making a feeble joke is, to say the least of it, decidedly annoying.

Ah! if my betrothed could see how joyfully I sometimes leave her stiff and proper society, and betake myself to that of two sirens whose rendezvous is the Alhambra, and whose tastes in beverages are catholic, ranging as they do from bottled beer to

brut imperial, she would rather alter her opinions about my unworthy self. Blanche thinks I am good. It is not my fault. I try to undeceive her, and make out that I am a sinner of the deepest dye ; but she generally dismisses the subject with a lofty smile, as if to intimate that, when we are married, I shall be so occupied in contemplating and reverencing her virtues, that I shall be permeated by them, and become a model of goodness. I rather doubt it myself.

However, with some very warm friendships *en passant*, of which, of course, Blanche knows nothing, to lighten the solemnity of my engagement, I got on very well until just now. I have got a bad attack this time. That malicious young imp, Cupid, has barbed his arrow, and summon all my philosophy, and use the mental chloroform, alcohol, as I will, I can neither wrench out the dart nor deaden the pain.

It came about like this: I have a friend, Vaughan, whose house is a great resort, it is such a charmingly unaffected place. He is a literary man, whose hospitality and geniality are overpowering, and are well seconded by his well-read but amiable wife. He is a thoroughly good fellow, rather given to rhapsodizing, in which, however, he is gracefully checked by her. His house is always open. I have seen people in his absence sitting in his chair, using his pet pipe, and pencilling brainless criticisms on his writings, they felt so thoroughly at home. Familiar with pictures, a devotee to pre-Raffaellism, *au courant* with the latest book, the newest play, the raciest *on dit* of the clubs, every subject turned up for discussion at the sort of informal reception he held almost nightly. Here you might meet a young unappreciated painter who had genius, an occasional novelist, a verse-maker, a journalist, an actor or two

—all those people whose conversation is as the very salt of the earth, so well does it brighten and flavour life.

Needless to say that I, amongst many others, frequented these hospitable quarters. I was rather one of the elect, and, as a consequence, if the Vaughans had an invitation to see a new picture, or first night seats that they could share, I was generally asked to accompany them. One morning at breakfast I was looking through a wearisome pile of letters that seemed to smell of new cloth, stables, and cigars, and whose contents by no means belied the origin I fancied—duns. I came across a more friendly-looking one, addressed in my friend's characteristic scrawling hand. I welcomed it like an oasis in the desert, and read as follows :

‘ MY DEAR CLIFFORD,

‘ Peyton has sent me four dress-circles for the Lyceum to-morrow night. My wife,

Miss Marchmont, from Yorkshire, and myself are going, and, if you have nothing better to do, will you join us? If you can't, wire, and I'll ask Anderson. With kindest regards from Bertha,

‘Thine as usual,

‘H. V.’

Nothing very romantic about that, was there? and yet from it date all my troubles. I had made a half-promise to go to a card-party, but threw it over, and sent word to say I would go with the Vaughans. That night beheld me in correct war-paint at their house, and I was introduced to Vera Marchmont, a distant and poor relation of Mrs. Vaughan's. To say I fell in love at first sight would be by no means correct. She was no beauty. Rather short, with a pleasant oval face, too pale to be pretty, and yet with an attractive expression somewhat

bewildering in its capriciousness ; a nose decidedly *retroussé* ; small deeply-set dark eyes, twinkling in mischief behind superb lashes, and crowned with massy coils of dark hair—such was my summary of her appearance, and she was, poor little thing ! only a governess, and as such thoroughly enjoying her unwonted freedom.

Frank and unaffected, neither constrained nor *blasée*, Vera watched the performance with childlike delight, and a naïve freshness quite strange after the superior *nil admirari* style of my beloved.

Still, with all her girlishness, she had plenty of common-sense, and would criticise and make caustic little worldly-wise remarks and jokes, that showed a wisdom beyond her years—she was only twenty-one and an orphan—a wisdom born of poverty and the keen struggles with the buffeting of adverse fortune that sharpen the wits, and

often make a cleverer man of an errand-boy than so many born in the purple.

Vera was just the sort of girl, in fact, whose conquest is most difficult, for all her life she had had to keep so keen an eye on the main chance that the little frivolities and *nuances* of love-making had been unknown to her; and she would be likely to sum up a possible husband's qualifications for that post as relentlessly as any chaperone.

Nevertheless, I went home that night with a feeling of curious attraction towards her. It was not exactly love; it was the novelty, the change after Blanche Haviland. The latter, from a mere sensual point of view, was far the finer specimen of humanity, and I condemned my bad taste for sparing a thought from such a superb creature to bestow it on such a little pale-faced, snub-nosed chit as Vera Marchmont; and yet her odd winning ways had a wonderful fascination that it was hard to resist.

I sat long that night, and drank more Glen Headache than was good for me, telling myself how absurd I was to let my thoughts dwell on her, or my affections waver for a moment.

I saw Vera again and again — she was making a long visit—and I succumbed to the almost inexplicable charm she had for me, and which I can only imagine to have lain in the fact that she was the exact opposite in every respect to my betrothed. Where Blanche was tall and statuesque, Vera was short and devoid of the former's touch-me-not sort of dignity ; where beauty and Grecian regularity of features reigned in the one, the other was insignificant and almost plain ; and what in one were measured, high-bred tones, in the other were odd little half-laughing, half-malicious utterances, just tinged with a Yorkshire accent.

How shall I write it — I, whom honour, policy, and every incentive but love have bound ? and yet I feel how poor the milk-and-

watery affection I have for Blanche is beside the rapture I experience when Vera is near me, how utterly trifling all other considerations seem compared to the one that I love her.

As I write the words, I confess myself a scoundrel—nothing is too strong to describe how dishonourable I feel ; and yet this is a history of what is, not of what ought to be. Blanche's affections have nothing of the butterfly about them, and I shall perhaps break her heart. What am I to do? I have equivocated with myself ; I have put off the evil day of consideration as long as I can ; but circumstances have decided for me, and now I realize how I would far rather spend my life with Vera in the mines of Siberia than in a houseboat and perpetual fine weather with Blanche, which, barring Blanche, is my ideal of felicity. Blanche and unvarying cold perfection *versus* warm-hearted, lovable little Vera ! Who

would sit for ever and watch the placid, though it may be dignified, course of the peaceful mill-stream, perfect as it is in tranquil sylvan beauty? Give me rather the ocean—now smiling, now frowning; calm to-day, and lashed into a tempest of fury to-morrow—with all its intervening moods and shades of light and life and colour.

Vera soon began to look for my coming. We have been out together three times with the Vaughans, and I am fool enough to reflect on these times as glimpses of happiness. Nothing had passed between us except conventional hand-shakes, but sympathy and love can be transmitted by these. One evening, returning from the Crystal Palace, our party got separated, and Vera and I for several blessed heavenly moments were alone in a compartment. Was it wrong of me to take that little white hand—it was a shapely one—in my own?

Others might have been bolder, but I have always held that unprotected and defenceless womanhood is to be treated with as much respect as haughtier beauties envired by chaperones and big brothers of pugnacious dispositions. A quixotic idea perhaps, but it seems only fair to give the maiden all forlorn a chance for herself.

So with a tender diffidence I caressed that little hand, and the owner seemed by no means averse to the proceeding, although she assumed a half-smiling air, as if she and love-making were quite incompatible. That she thought of nothing serious was obvious, for she did not attempt to draw it away, and was evidently not self-conscious.

That night Mrs. Vaughan, with feminine perception, took occasion to speak to me on the subject.

‘Promise me,’ she said, ‘to leave Vera alone—you know what I mean. She is only

young, and has no one to look after her. You must not trifle with her peace of mind, especially as you are engaged to Miss Haviland.'

Mindful of the fascination Vera had for me, I replied laughingly and evasively:

'Oh, Bertha, Miss Marchmont knows quite well how to take care of herself, I am sure; and I think you have given me such a shocking reputation as *un homme galant* that you need have no fear. Besides that, trust Blanche to look after me.'

Just then, to my relief, someone came and interrupted an interview that bothered me more than I liked to confess to myself afterwards.

But our understanding was advancing as the days went on. Gentle but unmistakable pressures of the hand on alighting from a train or parting at night, and expressive looks—those most eloquent phrases of love's language

—were expanding Vera's slight capacity for yielding to the tender passion.

One night, after I had not seen her for a week, I detected just the faintest responsive squeeze when our hands touched ; and once, when our eyes met, I saw the love-light in hers for one flash, before her eyelids drooped suddenly and she became silent and embarrassed. I said nothing, as a *tête-à-tête* was always out of the question, thanks to Mrs. Vaughan's vigilance, but I determined to risk a good deal.

I learnt the Vaughans had no engagement the next afternoon, and presently getting Vera to myself for a moment, I asked her to meet me at Notting Hill Gate Station. I spoke calmly enough, though my pulses were throbbing with excitement—to me it was momentous. If she came as I asked, clandestinely, and knowing of my engagement to Blanche, she cared enough for me to hazard something,

and it would establish a slight connection that might be deepened into something warmer.

Vera listened with downcast eyes, and my whole soul was in mine as they met hers, when she looked up at me with a conscious glance, and then turned them away as she replied :

‘ Oh, I daren’t do such a thing. I couldn’t get away. Mrs. Vaughan would want to know where I was going.’

I suppressed a strong desire to say, ‘ Then, darling, you would come if you could,’ and it was well I did so, for someone had come up unobserved behind us. When I perceived it, I gave her one more tender, eloquent, pleading look that meant unutterable things ; and then, to throw off the scent that inevitable somebody, who is always *de trop* at the critical moment, like the Derby dog, I said gaily :

‘ Oh yes, you must—you really ought to. It will do those poor heathen so much good.’

For I just recollected a meeting that was to

be held, in a day or two, to provide the Fijians with Bibles or bear's-grease, or something else equally useful.

Of course, when I left several others must do the same, and an opportunity of getting a definite answer from Vera was denied me, although I just had an instant's time to beg her earnestly to come as I had asked.

That night and yesterday morning—for I was too restless to sleep as usual—I was devoured with anxiety. Painfully absurd of me, but I could not help it. Will she come? I asked myself a hundred times.

Behold me at the rendezvous at the appointed time, dressed carefully with an affectation of carelessness. *Ars est celare artem*, you know.

I waited and waited, hoping against hope, until a crushing sense of failure sent me away. It was humiliating. I, who as a rule only had to throw my handkerchief, to ask a favour—a

mere assignation—and be refused. I never realized before how much I loved Vera, how much she was to me.

I went home with a dead sense of despair that seemed to have taken all the rose-colour, the zest out of my life. A friend drops in. He notices my abstraction, and I have to smile and even join in the laugh against myself—bitter mockery as it is—and sear my own wounds as it were.

So passes the evening, and in desperation I drink deeply to drown my sorrows; but the rosy god smiles not on my libations, and I only grow more solemn with each glass. Bed at last, and, thank heaven, I do sleep at last until the morning comes. Crowds of unpleasant recollections come upon me, mingled with very strong opinions on the deleterious effects of fusel oil. What to do with myself I don't know, so *faute de mieux*, I sit down and write this account of my sorrows,

with the assistance of a big brandy and soda.

Meredith, my disturber, has been and gone. I will not leave my cell except for soft, tender, womanly companionship and compassion. I would as soon go to a statue for comfort as to Blanche. By-the-bye, I have to take her to the Vaughans to-night—and I wish to goodness I hadn't. My head is hot, and my hand shakes even after a cold bath : and Blanche has not a pitying eye for little failings like these. Hang Blanche ! There, I feel better after that outburst.

It is annoying to my *amour propre*—even if my feelings were not concerned—to be slighted like this by a little chit of a girl, a warm-hearted one, too, whom I thought I could influence by now as easily as a puppet is moved by its wires. Why is it ? I am not getting so old that I am losing the secret of pleasing women—the talisman that was given

me at my birth. *Nous verrons*, but, happy thought! perhaps *la petite* Vera is repenting now. After such an exhibition of virtue as not to come at my request, there must be a reaction, and she may be even now sitting in sackcloth and ashes, pining to see me as much as I have done to see her.

I will go to see the Vaughans (I mean Vera) again. I will assume indifference and punish her, for the feminine mind is often obstinate and cross-grained. Pull it one way and it will pull hard the other. If I appear not to care for her, she may be at my feet directly.

I remember the little Lysaght, as we used to call her. She and I used to quarrel and abuse one another in fun, and at last it seemed to grow into earnest, and I really thought she hated me until one day, when I was saying good-bye—for she was going back to India with her husband—she suddenly began to cry

and hang upon me very limply indeed. Now I had a great respect for Jim Lysaght, and I wouldn't have done anything to injure him, but they were off next morning, so what did it matter? I took her in my arms and comforted her with a few kisses—rather warmer than Jim would have approved of perhaps—but if soft clinging caresses come in my way, am I to avoid them? *Pas si bête!*

She began piteously, 'Bertie, darling, I know I shall never live long in that dreadful India. If I could only be with you!' Then a sob, and, as I said nothing, some more broad hints for me to eventually utilize Sir James Hannen's services in *Lysaght v. Lysaght* and Clifford.

This would not do, and I had to interpose that I did not know she looked on me with any warmer feelings than a friend, and so on. Poor Jim! he little knew. But I did my duty. I talked to her kindly but firmly, and

told her what a good fellow he was, and how fond he was of her, also how lots of women would be only too glad to have him for a lover. I named several, and I hope the recording angel will let me off lightly, for what I said was pure invention. This last worked a cure. Her eyes flashed, and she said indignantly, 'Would they indeed, the brazen creatures? I'll show them my husband wants no one but me.'

'That's right, Marion,' I replied encouragingly ; 'and now forget all you said to me, as I shall.'

'Yes, Bertie ; but I shall never forget you, dear, and what you've said to me. I shall always feel as if you were my brother ; and come, it is good-bye now, give me another kiss, and I wouldn't mind if Jim saw. There!' and Mrs. Lysaght gave me a regular hug. As I walked home I felt a virtuous glow all over me. It is nice to be made love to, and

to have an opportunity of doing good as well.

I wrenched myself out of bed next morning with a violent effort, and went and saw them off by the P. and O. special from Liverpool Street. She was leaning on his arm, her face wreathed in smiles, and when the train started she grasped my hand frankly and looked me straight in the face, while Jim nearly crushed my hand with the fervent pressure he gave it. I wonder whether she told him anything.

Shall I go to the Vaughans' to-night? Yes, I will; and beyond one glance of poignant reproach, I will not wear my heart upon my sleeve, I'll be hanged if I do. That little snub-nosed woman shall not laugh at me. And yet, Vera! Vera *darling*!

CHAPTER III.

The next morning.

I HAVE been, and my plan succeeded. Vera loves me, I know she does. I wonder why. I often wonder why women care for me. I am not bad looking, but I am not by any means brilliant ; there are plenty of men finer, handsomer, bolder, cleverer, wittier, and to my eyes twice as attractive as I am, and yet, though they get the admiration, I am the favourite, the confidant, the chosen partner at a dance when to others their card is full. How is it ? I am too lazy to flatter them elaborately, and often to notice what they are wearing, and yet they do like to sit

out and listen to soft nothings from me.

I have not by any means the character of a member of the Y.M.C.A., and yet the dragons in charge do not mind their darlings being with me. Perhaps that is because I have a winning manner, and do not mind wasting five minutes in pleasant talk with the duenna to secure, say, fifteen with her protégé.

Doubtless my reputation has a good deal to do with the way I am sought after. I really have earned it, and the little dears like to come and stroke the wolf as it were, and see if he really does growl, and belie his outward appearance, showing his fangs beneath his society sheep-skin clothing. And it looks fast, too, to be seen with me, and to tell someone afterwards, 'Oh, Emily dear, I was talking last night to that dreadful Mr. Clifford, and he was *so* nice. He had such a

soft look in his eyes, and I'm sure he can't be half as bad as people say. I do like him so much.'

And so the little moths flutter round the flame nearer and nearer, and if they get singed at last, how can I help it? I always tell them I am engaged to Blanche Haviland, and they know it is true. They smile at my love-making at first, but it is only a question of time. Then, when the crisis comes, and I have to remind them of my forgotten engagement, who can say anything? Blanche hears something now, ^{and} ^{again}, and cuts up rough after her fashion; but I always abase myself, and take my lecture meekly, and then all ends as lovers' quarrels generally do, and peace reigns again until the next *esclandre*.

Last night at Vaughan's there was a foolish gushing kind of girl attached herself to me as firmly as a limpet to a rock. She was making me perfectly ridiculous with her attentions

and loud laughing and talking, and I could not shake her off, try as I would. Half the room were watching us, and just as I was about to fly in desperation, and was inventing an excuse, Blanche sailed up in her most queenly fashion, and said, ‘Bertie, will you get me a cup of tea? Oh, I beg your pardon, Miss Poppleton, I did not see you; but you know I have a claim on Mr. Clifford’s services. Did he not tell you?’

Miss Poppleton was equal to the occasion, and replied maliciously, ‘Oh yes, and I have been congratulating him, but now I think it is *you* who ought to be congratulated.’

Well, Vera loves me, not a doubt of it. Have I been too hard on her, poor girl?—but then Blanche’s presence made me colder. Curiously enough, Blanche never cared for the Vaughans, and I fancy is jealous of Vera, but considers her so insignificant that she will not condescend to show it. What a stale,

flat, unprofitable task it was attending on her confounded stateliness, while I was longing to take my Vera in my arms !

With Blanche there, of course any satisfactory interview with Vera was out of the question, although in the one brief moment when our eyes met I could read in hers that she loved me, and yet dared not do as I had asked her, while my expression was meant to imply enough tender reproach to make her regret not coming. During the evening, when we came in contact, I was cool and polite, laughing with and at her as if she was nothing to me at all. When she looked at me once appealingly, I hardly had resolution enough to make a joke in reply ; but Blanche's eyes were upon me, and I laughed, which annoys her, as she always asks why I do not laugh and joke with her. *Entre nous*, you would as soon go to a drawing-room, and make a joke with her Majesty. Some day, just to horrify

her, I know I shall slap her on the back and say, 'How are you, Blanche, old girl?' just as if she were Miss Tottie Delorme of the Nudity. She will start, I shall laugh, and then she will put on a pained superior look.

And this is what I shall have to live with, on an average, three hundred out of the three hundred and sixty-five days of every year ; what I shall have to face at breakfast sometimes, when brandy and soda and dry toast are preferable to the finest Mocha and *foie gras*. I'll be shot if I do though—I'll bribe one of her servants and have it in bed. I'll take good care to stipulate for a latchkey, and no apparitions waiting up for me. There's Brown, my doctor, a capital young fellow, and Blanche likes him. I'll get him to swear late hours are necessary for my constitution ; or, better still, he might say I am consumptive and get me off the match altogether.

Poor little Vera ! I did tease her, and I

laughed and talked with a careless, indifferent air whenever I had a chance, until I believe she thought I had only been making fun of her when I asked her to meet me. She gave me a plaintive, imploring little look when we said 'Good-night,' that I am very thankful Blanche did not see, or there would have been a *mauvais quart d'heure* for me on the way home.

Blanche was tenderer than usual with me. She pressed me to come in, and made me share a pint of champagne. Then she perched herself on my knee, pretended to smoke, and took off a lot of her dignity and stiffness. My feelings can be better imagined than described. She did love me. I often asked her why, and pointed out my own failings with a reckless frankness more often used concerning the mote in a neighbour's eye than the beam in one's own. To this psychological problem she could give no solution, and only persisted

that she did love me, which was enough and more than I wanted.

At night.

My conscience reproached me about Vera, and I pictured to myself her taking my conduct *au sérieux*, and ceasing to think of me altogether. I must see her and come to some understanding. I repented my cool unkindness.

This afternoon I called. The devil looks after his own, they say, and Mr. and Mrs. Vaughan were out. Miss Marchmont was at home with a bad headache, and had not gone for a drive with them. Could I see her? Yes, if I would wait; and I was shown into the drawing-room. What was the cause of that headache? I wondered. Had Vera been crying for me, or was it an excuse to stay at home—guessing, with love's own intuition, that I should call?

Presently she came into the room, looking just pale enough to be interesting, and with a becoming dark tint under her eyes. She

sprang forward with a little coo of pleasure at seeing me, and there was no mistaking her feelings, for her face was lighted up with gladness.

I was strongly tempted to take her in my arms—I hungered for a touch of those lips, and to have her clasped to my heart ; but prudence restrained me, and I only kissed the hand she extended to me with a deference I would not have accorded to Blanche.

The little hypocrite began :

‘ I am so sorry Mrs. Vaughan is not at home.’

‘ Oh, it is of no consequence,’ I replied, fighting with the passion burning within me. ‘ I only wanted to ask if she had made up her mind about going to Bentley Priory ; but that can wait, and I *did* want to see you.’

Vera blushed with a consciousness that was flattering to my self-esteem, and then recovering herself, began an attack on me.

‘Why? Have you any message for me from Miss Haviland?’

This was a home thrust that disconcerted me for a moment, but I replied coolly :

‘No, she must have forgotten to give it me, if you expected one. I wanted to say,’ I continued, ‘how sorry I was to have asked you to meet me. Please forgive me, and I will go away and try and forget my disappointment, as I should like you to forget my offence.’

She half laughed and said :

‘It was not a very serious thing to ask me, but you know I couldn’t possibly come, and what would Miss Haviland think?’

‘Well,’ I said shortly and sorrowfully, ‘I won’t repeat it ; and now I have made my *amende*, I had better go, and I will keep away until you have left town, as I don’t want my presence to annoy you.’

This was too bad of me, and Vera showed strong symptoms of breaking down.

‘I am sure I never gave you any reason to think so,’ she exclaimed petulantly ; ‘one would think it was my fault. Stay away if you want to ; but don’t flatter yourself it is to please me.’

‘I am only making matters worse the more I say, so good-bye.’ Taking one unresisting hand in mine, I kissed it with fervent homage, and then, looking up, I said with intense suppressed passion : ‘Good-bye, *Vera* !’

Perhaps the time will come when my heart will not pulsate with astounding rapidity in the rapture of conquest, when I shall be cold-blooded enough to account for each fraction of the glad exulting moments ; but at present I am not too *blasé* to enjoy, and lose my head during these precious seconds.

So I don’t know exactly how it came about, or who made the first move, but in less than

the time it takes to write it Vera's wistful little face, then miserable with disappointment, but now radiant with happiness, was resting on my shoulder, and my arms were closely pressed around her quivering form, while tears of joy were running down her cheeks.

'*Dearest,*' she murmured, 'is this heaven?'

'No, child,' I answered; and this simple-minded question made me feel a little ashamed of myself—'what makes you think so?'

'I am so happy,' she answered earnestly; 'I have never been so happy as this before in all my life.'

We seemed to understand one another, to be all in all to one another after a long separation, and for some time we gave ourselves up to the rapture, the ineffable bliss of being united—regardless of interruptions or servants listening. But Vera, true to her non-indulgent training, was the first to break the spell that bound us.

Standing erect, she looked at me with dilating eyes, and said slowly, 'But—you—are—engaged—to Miss Haviland.'

I acknowledged it mutely, and made an appealing gesture to her to come back to my arms.

'No, don't touch me, don't come near me,' she exclaimed wildly; 'you belong to her.'

'Vera, darling,' I said ardently, taking her to my heart again by main force, 'it is true; you knew it before, and yet you love me. You cannot doubt how much I love you. Only promise to be mine, and I will free myself from my engagement. I am bound to Blanche in honour, I know, but what is that to the wreck of our two lives? I cannot give you up, dearest; I will have you for my own!'

'No, I will not hear of it,' answered Vera, tremulously but decidedly. 'Supposing

Blanche Haviland loves you as I do, it would break her heart. If you married me under such circumstances, we should never be happy ; you would be for ever regretting you had not married her.'

'Vera,' I urged affectionately, 'I love you too well for that ever to happen.'

Without heeding me, she continued, speaking rapidly, with passionate energy : 'Fool that I have been ! I ought to have known better than to let myself think of you. And yet how I loved you ! My God ! it was too heavenly happiness for mortals to have long. I love you so well that I cannot trust myself in your dear presence. Remember, I am an orphan, and almost alone in the world. I have my own living to earn, and my only stock-in-trade is my character and my education. You are strong ; be merciful, and promise me as a gentleman to go away and never see me again. Let my heart wear out

its misery without being tortured by the sight of you, my darling.'

'Vera,' I pleaded, 'this is madness ; listen to me.'

'No, I will not ; I have resolution now, another time it may fail me. If you love me, promise !'

She begged with an intense earnestness that overbore all my opposition, and I had no alternative but to exclaim despairingly :
'I promise !'

'Then leave me,' she rejoined in heart-broken tones. 'But no, stay : kiss me once before you go, darling !'

Seizing her in a passionate embrace, I kissed her again and again, and then I left the house

United and parted all in one short hour !
I was never so completely routed before in my life ; but Vera's pleading *ad misericordiam* appealed to me in a way I could not resist, and, bad as I am, I could not find it in my

heart to persecute that poor little girl with attentions that would only end in—What? This question never struck me before. I could not have married her—it would have been too absurd. With Blanche it is another affair. A *mariage de convenance* truly on my side; but who is to say that is not a satisfactory arrangement?—and respect and esteem are big factors in wedded happiness, which by no means always survives the fading of love's young dream in the matches arranged by Master Cupid.

Besides, if a man tires of the formality and monotony of the marriage tie, and wishes he were Turk or Mormon, are there not plenty of distractions to be bought? Verily the married man is welcome in the purlieus of Pimlico and the Wood. 'If he can afford a wife, he has evidently plenty of money. Come, let us devour him,' says the genus *cocotte*; and the man who grudges his wife

a new bonnet, or a stall at the opera, will lavish pounds on the shrill laughing, painted Jezebels. The neglected wife soon learns her lesson, and amuses herself after her kind, and it is hard to blame her.

CHAPTER IV.

VANITY of vanities, all is vanity. I often think so. My life palls upon me ; I have tried to thrust Vera out of my thoughts, and I have succeeded, but at what a price ! Her image, when I do let my thoughts rest upon her, is the more vividly painful and distinct after my usual abstention. If I had an incentive to work, ambition to be famous, or a loved one to work for, how different it might be !

Ah ! That is a big sigh sandwiched between two puffs at my cigar, which, as usual, accords with my own mood and is burning vilely. My whisky and seltzer tastes flat,

and I feel in a most unenviable frame of mind. I have not touched this history for months.

With Vera all the light went out of my life. If anyone had told me I could feel so deeply, I would not have believed it. Yet the traces are there. I feel older, I feel wickeder. I am beginning to hate Blanche Haviland ; the day of my bondage is getting nearer, and I feel less inclined than ever to submit to it.

Since I lost Vera I have exhausted all the pleasures and dissipations I know of. I am pale, and when I see myself in the glass the devil seems to be looking out of my eyes at me. I have tried to forget Vera in the company of venal beauty and hired caresses ; I have dwelt in the tents of the *demi monde*, and drowned my sorrows in the flowing bowl, as well as lost more than I can afford at cards. A demon of feverish unrest possesses me, and am I to chain myself down by the leg to Blanche, to

be a pensioner on her bounty, and to have to endure the mill-horse life, the mathematically precise existence that she would like? Bah ! it would stifle me. I couldn't be decently polite after a week of it.

I can see the honeymoon now ; the prospect haunts me like a nightmare. Instead of my bachelor portmanteau, we shall have six times as much luggage as a commercial traveller ; and if I swear at anyone, Blanche will say reprovingly, ' Hush, Bertie ! I am *surprised* at you.'

We shall go to Paris, of course, and all the places where there are cathedrals and pictures, and other vexations of spirit. And there is no getting Blanche to shirk or pass over anything. She will see them all, and will resent missing one as if she were being defrauded of her rights. A month or two will pass like this on the Continent ; people will shun us idiotically, thinking we are all in all to one

another, while we grow more and more bored each day. I shall have to be good and proper ; I must behave myself then. Bright eyes may smile on me, and I may not return their greeting ; and I must always be tied to Blanche, whose measured accents will grow to grate upon my ear, and whose perpetual presence will seem like that of a gaoler, while at last she will discover that those faults I have often confessed to so freely are a stern reality, and not merely a subject for gentle little lectures and persuasion.

A plague on honeymoons ! Why can't we just get married quietly, and live on our ordinary life—that would be bad enough. I have no practice—I did not want any—but that is no obstacle ; Blanche has money enough for us both. One thing I know : when we are married I will use all my and her influence to get some briefs ; then the plea of business will take me away sometimes from the clockwork regularity

of our life, for our actions will be regulated by our engagement list, and our time might well be measured with a metronome.

I heard from Mrs. Vaughan that Vera had lost her situation as governess, and was much troubled about it. It was bad enough to think of her at the mercy of some vulgar *bourgeoise*, and tormented daily by some horrid children, who would wear away all her brightness and freshness. I felt a warm sympathy with Herod when I pictured her worried to death by hateful little creatures, who can be the biggest tyrants imaginable when they choose.

Why could not I help her? What was the use of money when you could not spend it as you liked? If I had sent her some anonymously, her indomitable little spirit would not have used it, and Mrs. Vaughan would have smiled sardonically if I had asked her to send it as coming from her. Poor little Vera!

never a trouble should have rested on your dear head, if I could have prevented it, and yet I was powerless to help you! I went and saw Blanche, however, and tried to enlist her sympathy, somewhat as follows, but I had to be careful—it was treading on dangerous ground:

‘I cannot understand your motive, Bertie. I dare say you mean well, but it is, to say the least of it, very curious that you should take such an interest in this Miss Marchmont.’

Of course, Blanche was suspicious. I expected that. A woman in love never imagines her lover can be disinterested to other women, but I tried to disarm her suspicion.

‘Oh, Blanche dear, why?’ (this very insinuatingly. ‘We saw a good deal of her at the Vaughans’, and it seems such a shame—she was such a jolly little thing. If you saw a case for pity and help in the streets you

would not hesitate for a moment, and it must be much more distressing to anyone well brought up to be homeless and friendless. I often think and reproach myself that what I spend on cigars would keep Ver—Miss Marchmont from want altogether.'

'Mrs. Vaughan can help her,' Blanche said coldly.

'Yes, but you know Vaughan is one of those good fellows who are no one's enemy but their own. He is very liberal, and lives quite up to his income, and I know he has been hit heavily lately in some speculation. I am sure Bertha's dresses must take more than her allowance, and I fancy she considers Miss Marchmont an encumbrance ; it must be very unpleasant to accept assistance which is not freely given.'

'I wish you would get out of that habit of using Mrs. Vaughan's Christian name,' rejoined my betrothed. 'It is a familiarity I

don't like, and it is not respectful either to her or me.'

This looked ominous. I had put my foot in it, but I tried a few honeyed endearments ; I was sparing enough with them as a rule.

'All her friends use it, but I won't if you don't like me to. You know I would do anything for you. And now, Blanche, darling, if you love me, be generous, and do something to help Miss Marchmont. It isn't often I ask a favour of you, dear. I was thinking of you, and how happy I felt to know you were safe from harm and necessity, and I did feel sorry for her.'

I kissed Blanche affectionately, and she was conquered. A little love went a long way with her, for lately I had been rather cold and indifferent. She promised to interest herself for Vera, and try and procure her another situation.

'And if I can't,' she added, 'I will ask her

to come and stay with me, if that will please you, Bertie dear.'

I had gained my point, and went away quite satisfied. Thank heaven ! Vera was at least provided for—a little good done, at all events.

Then, as my chains seemed tightening around me, and my friends chaffed me about the remainder of my bachelorhood, I made the most of the time so effectually that in three weeks I was taken ill. I believe Dr. Brown told Blanche something vague about brain fever and the nervous system ; I know myself it was the famous triad '*Bacco, tabacco e Venere,*' that, like the three furies, had worked their own sweet will upon me.

My mother was anxious, but too old and failing to travel ; Blanche, in defiance of propriety, would have brought a staff of attendants, and nursed me herself ; but the doctor, and I shall never know how to thank

him sufficiently, insisted that the sight of her face might be dangerous in my excited state, and prevailed on her to stay away. He had an inkling of the state of affairs, for after he had pulled me through, and was giving me a lecture, saying if I did so again it would be my funeral and not my marriage I should attend, his eye presently took a malicious twinkle, and he said :

‘By the way, Clifford, my boy, I didn’t mention it to Miss Haviland, but when you were delirious, we heard a great deal about a certain “Vera.” She seems to have been on your mind pretty considerably.’

‘Oh, yes,’ I answered, trying not to show confusion, for I was ill and weak, ‘it was a little girl in trouble whom I was very sorry for, and I got Miss Haviland to interest herself about her.’

‘I should think Miss Haviland would be very much interested indeed if she knew all,’

he replied significantly ; and then added : ‘ but there, my dear fellow, don’t excite yourself. A medical man can keep a secret quite as well as a priest.’

I had been ill, I was as nervous as a cat, starting at the slightest sound, and it was decided I must go on a sea voyage to the Cape. Blanche was nobly self-sacrificing about it, and even forbore to upbraid me for what she must have known was the cause of my illness, though there was a gentle, reproachful look in her eyes that made me feel a scoundrel. I must have every luxury and comfort, and in the most delicate way she hinted that I was to consider all she had as my own, because it so soon would be so. I would as soon have taken Judas’s thirty pieces of silver as accepted the slightest assistance from her.

Well, at length my passage was taken, and I said an affectionate farewell to Blanche and several others of my friends, who had mus-

tered to the extent of nearly a dozen to see me off. I believe they would have raised a cheer, but the railway-station was hardly the place, and Blanche's presence restrained them. Poor girl! her cold, proud face showed signs of emotion, and she needed all her resolution to preserve her calmness. How anyone so unworthy as myself ever contrived to gain her affections I cannot think.

I went on board, and made myself comfortable, and eventually we set sail. There is a glorious sense of exhilaration when we reach blue water, and the most nervous of the passengers, dreading sea-sickness as a *bête noir*, abandon themselves to the delight of breathing the bracing, life-giving air, the salt breeze that fills the lungs, and sends the blood coursing vigorously through the veins. The sea is calm as yet—the sky and water vie with one another in cerulean hue of glorious brightness. A gentle breeze is blowing, in-

creased by the speed with which the steamer cleaves the waves, and tempers the slanting rays of a glowing sun.

At length dinner is served, and I take the opportunity of studying my fellow-voyagers. I have an uneasy consciousness that I may be regarded as a Jonah, with my white, haggard face, whose hollow pallor is heightened by my carefully-groomed moustache ; but I know that I am the best sailor amongst them, and can laugh in my sleeve. Perhaps old Mahogany-face, the captain, thinks so, for he remarks to me with a grim humour that this is the best meal some of them will make for several days to come. The vessel is beginning to roll very perceptibly now, but some of our passengers are hardened, and no one as yet has shown any signs of discomfort.

There are a variety of people—troublesome children, and children meek as mice, the

young and flirting wife *moins* husband, who will talk and laugh with everybody, and who, I know from experience, will by this time to-morrow be prostrated in the agonies of *mal de mer*, and will expect everyone to wait on her hand and foot. Then there is the widow, who, I am sure, has a sad story to tell to enlist your sympathy, and whose demure, wouldn't-hurt-a-fly expression conceals a cat-like watch for someone to replace 'poor, *dear* Reginald!' There is a Lord High Commissioner of something or other, a little fussy, pompous man, evidently dragged up from the ranks ; he is so self-assertive, and appears in a perpetual fever lest due deference should not be shown to his importance. Two or three civil servants, who form a coterie of their own, are laughing now at some departmental joke with the appreciation of school-boys.

Then I turn to my neighbours. On one

side a lady, fat, forty, and very red-faced, is eating a dinner as if it were to be her last for a long time, in which supposition she is not far from correct. On the other side a muscular Christian, a fine specimen of the Church militant, but with such an earnest, grave expression that I mentally liken him to 'the austere man.' We gather from his remarks, for this Boanerges is communicative, that he is going out to preach in the gold-fields, 'to teach men that souls, as well as gold, are precious.'

Beside him sits his wife, a creature built in a more fragile mould, but filled with the same enthusiasm that animates him and often makes heroines out of the most unlikely material. She hangs upon his words, and even owns to her own aspirations after the good work. She has a nice face, kind, affectionate, and pre-eminently kissable; not anything striking, but still with a quiet

power in it. It reminds me of a similar but more saint-like one I saw under a Salvation Army bonnet at Ramsgate. I was standing watching the girl to whom it belonged, for she looked so refined and superior to the rest of the 'army,' and was even weaving in my mind a little romance about her, when presently her turn came. She gave out part of a hymn, one line of which she read, 'And turns our 'ell to 'eaven.' My disillusion was complete.

The Reverend Ambrose Nelson—such is his name—and his wife certainly are a very interesting couple. I am drawn into the conversation rather against my will, as I hate talking to a lot of people before I know something of them, and I earn his goodwill—for he is not above small vanities—by drawing a parallel between him and his great namesake, Admiral Nelson, and I contrive to do it so neatly that he can take it as a

compliment without appearing inordinately puffed up with vanity.

Presently, on deck, he condescends to accept a cigar, and we get into closer conversation. Such is the intense earnestness of the man that it takes away the vulgarity and the bad form which is always dragging in his cloth in season and out of season. He remarks on my ill-appearance, and trusts the lesson learnt on a bed of sickness will be seed thrown on good ground. Half an hour of this from a canting prig would be purgatory, but his enthusiasm interests me. Under his stern exterior he has a large heart, embracing the whole world in its wide charity, and he would sacrifice himself martyr-like for the good of his fellow men, had he but the opportunity.

I am afraid I should sadly shock this good man if he knew me as I am. Just now I am listening, because it is less exertion than any-

thing else, as he unfolds his visions of a grand universal religion, in which all nations shall be brethren, and all people love one another, and other similar Utopian ideas. My thoughts wandered occasionally to Mrs. Nelson, and I wondered if she would talk to me like this, and whether she believed in it all, when presently he abruptly said :

‘Well, Mr. Clifford, I must bid you good-night. You must have a talk with my wife, and she will tell you her opinions.’

I only said I should be delighted, but I thought within myself, ‘If I can’t find some livelier subject than religion to discuss with that nice little woman, it is a pity.’

Then I retired to the bridge to share my cigars with Mahogany-face, who seemed to have taken a fancy to me, and even applauded my feeble jokes with a growling chuckle, which is a sure sign of favour to a landsman. But I had yachted enough to know what port

and starboard and the weather side meant, and many were the yarns he told me of his voyages when steam was only an auxiliary. How often our feelings reflect the weather ! As I sat alternately watching the brilliance of the moon and the stars, and the long, semi-luminous track our propeller left behind, I felt a joyful sense of life and freedom and satisfaction at having left Blanche behind. We might have been on our honeymoon together—thank heaven, we weren't !

Next day I was introduced to Mrs. Nelson. We promenaded and talked together, commencing with religious topics, but soon changing them for more worldly ones, to which proceeding she appeared by no means averse.

Day after day we met, and we were soon thoroughly at home with one another, conversing naturally on subjects of interest to us both. Nelson himself often talked with me,

but as I made a point of agreeing with him in everything he said, he did not make the progress towards my conversion that he was anxious to do. It was curious to me, who was too lazy and unintrospective to analyze our feelings, but Mrs. Nelson and I became interested in one another. Perhaps she was sympathetic, for I found myself telling her everything about my life, and listening with the same interest to her story, and on my honour I had no thought of anything wrong. We got on remarkably well together—that was all, but this summer calm was to be succeeded by a storm.

One evening, just after the twilight, she and I were alone on the after-deck. Her husband's stentorian tones floated up through the lamp-lit skylight of the saloon, and we were pacing the deck in true sailor-like fashion—so many steps forward, a turn, and then back again. The weather was fine, the officer on the bridge

was practically invisible, and we were quite alone.

A sudden lurch of the vessel just as we were turning round threw her into my arms, and, as I held her there an instant to prevent her falling, a sudden impulse prompted me, and I said, more jokingly than in earnest :

‘ Shall I take one kiss, one taste of Paradise ?’

Nothing of love-making had ever passed between us, so that I was more than surprised when, clinging to me, she received and returned that kiss with a passionate ardour that I myself was far from feeling. Then, tearing herself from my arms, she rushed away to her berth, while I, left alone and astonished, stood motionless, reflecting on this singular occurrence. Of course it was love, and a serious case, too : and the more I thought of it the quicker it woke a responsive echo in my own heart. It is delicious to be loved and

to know it, and, with me at least, it always evokes a reciprocal tenderness.

Later on the same evening I was sitting on a deck-chair, thinking over this last *affaire*, when out of the dim obscurity Mrs. Nelson came to me again. I could see, as she passed the skylight, that she could not look into my eyes, and her face was burning.

I said to her 'Kiss me,' and she obeyed, at the same time sinking down on to my knee and clasping her arms tightly around me in the darkness. With her face close pressed against mine, she told me with tears how she loved me ; but, after a brief interval of that little heart beating against my own, she fled again in affright at her own wrong-doing.

I sat long and thought anxiously. I began to love her, and I felt I could not draw back after giving her so much encouragement ; yet it was embarrassing, especially on board ship, where clandestine meetings are apt to be inter-

rupted, and there is no secluded spot which you can retire to and feel quite safe from observation.

Still, we continued to escape it somehow, and night after night, sitting in the darkness with our hands clasped, we discussed the old, old story. Gladys Nelson said she thought she loved her husband when she married him, but she had never known what love was until she met me, and she revelled in the sweet agony of the consciousness of her own sin. Such a liaison could have but one ending, although she resisted manfully for a time.

I was uneasy at times, when I reflected that this woman, who had given herself body and soul to me, and whose affection was more than ordinarily strong, would not be easily got rid of: for under her apparently unemotional appearance she concealed a depth of passion and power that not only surprised but often alarmed me. Although I loved her, I had no

ambition to deprive the divine of her and her services. As the time for my landing drew near, and I gave no hint of elopements or other similar arrangements for the future, I began to sincerely regret it all, for I was often treated to floods of tears, and protestations that she could never leave me.

CHAPTER V.

I SUPPOSE I ought to blush to own to this story, shame to tell it here in black and white—but it is the truth ; and really, after some of the *causes célèbres* of late years, with the loathsome details of the evidence actually printed in leading journals, my simple little story must read like a good little Sunday-school prize-book, in which the bad boy invariably ends on the gallows, or in penal servitude, and the good one picks up the pin on the bank steps, and, by easy stages, becomes a partner and marries the banker's daughter.

But as long as men and women are born

with passions, and opportunities arise for gratifying them, so surely will they do so—as they have ever since Eve tempted Adam. Stolen fruit is sweet ; the surreptitious kiss of the pretty housemaid is far more piquant than the matutinal embrace Angelina bestows on Edwin, as he starts for that horrid city. Wrong! Of course it is—but men and women are like Dr. Watts' dogs, 'it is their nature to.'

For me our liaison formed a very pleasant incident on what might otherwise have been a tedious voyage. It sounds callous to say so, but let it stand as a protest against so much of the hypocrisy that prevails. Things may not be so bad in England ; but behold the canny Scot, who is in arms against the slightest desecration of his unlovely Sawbath, who is garbed in a cloak of Puritan straitlacedness, and seems the embodiment of ascetic piety. That is the whited outside of the sepulchre.

If you want to know the mean, narrow-minded hypocrite, look on the other side of the picture ; note the surreptitious drinking, and study the statistics of the illegitimate births.

There is little more to add. We spent days of delicious intimacy together, only tempered by Gladys' tearful entreaties and arguments, and by awkward appearances and *rencontres* with her husband ; but she, artful little woman, knew well how to manage him, and a hint that we were talking about religion for my good, sent the big, honest, trusting man contented away ; nay, more, he encouraged our intimacy, so secure in the consciousness of his own virtue that he never imagined the possibility of frailty in his wife.

It has always been a favourite dictum of mine that a woman, who has a reformed *roué* for her husband, or who herself knows enough of evil to discriminate between it and good, is

far better adapted to cope with the many and insidious temptations that the stronger sex (careless of consequences, and selfish enough to risk *esclandre*, misery, anything for an idle hour's pastime) is so ready to put in her way, than the one who, innocent in mind, knows not evil and its penalties, for retribution comes swiftly and not *pede claudo*. The latter falls sometimes without realizing what she is doing, whereas the former knows well the lurid prospect that awaits her. The man who has been a profligate, and realizes what perils beset a woman's path, is the man of all others to keep an eye on his wife's virtue, and to protect her honour if he loves her. He knows that unrestrained intercourse with fascinating and handsome men, born to flatter and deceive, is dangerous, while your innocent husband often encourages and facilitates that swift and straight road to ruin.

The moral of all this is not the time-

worn text, that the reformed rake makes the best husband ; but that a little leaven of ungodliness in the lump is not a bad thing in the man to whom you choose to entrust your favourite daughter's welfare—that is, if indeed you have any choice in the matter ; for nowadays the question ‘ what to do with our daughters ’ becomes so pressing, that one's mental mentor at once urges : Marry them, and that right quickly, to the first man who has the means and the inclination to pay for their board and lodging. Wherefore hurray not your minds, O Conscript Fathers, that the suitors for your daughters' hands are, or have been, a little wild, always provided they are not confirmed drunkards or profligates ; for our intense British respectability asserts itself when they marry and settle down, and in nine cases out of ten they become sober, steady, regular attendants at church, purse-proud combinations of broadcloth and banking

account, men of weight and pomposity, churchwardens possibly in the future ; models of respected propriety with hearts like the nether millstone, and unblemished reputations for rectitude and twenty shillings in the pound. Ah, me ! I marvel sometimes, is the change for the better ? The publican, albeit he is drawn in the more favourable light, always seems so much the more estimable character of the two. As for the thoroughly bad and irreclaimable character, why, not having the gift of prophecy, how can we pick out this wolf in sheep's clothing from amongst his fellow men ?

As we neared Natal, and our parting became imminent, I was treated to hours of pitiful entreaty, floods of tears, and tender reproaches. I was very fond of Mrs. Nelson indeed by this time, but was I to ruin my life and spoil all my prospect because she took this ephemeral amusement *au grand sérieux* ? Not very likely, and while I deeply regretted her want

of control, I had to explain gently but firmly how disastrous for both of us, her leaving her husband for my unworthy self would be.

I am always weakminded where women are concerned, and especially if they have recourse to that last and most fatal weapon in their armoury—tears ; but I knew so well how weakness now would entail years of misery, perhaps, upon us afterwards, that I stood my ground ; and at length Gladys realized between her sobs that I was obdurate, and, as it takes two to make an elopement, and I would not be one of them, she had perforce to reconcile herself to her lot.

It was embarrassing, too, to have to undergo all these scenes. In a big steamship there are plenty of holes and corners, quiet little hiding places made for lovers and such like ; but when people were always encountering us together—a young and not unattractive woman, and a somewhat *roué* looking man—

it is not surprising if they marvelled at it, while we both fancied that they looked askance at us at meals in the saloon. However, *n'importe*, for the good blind Boanerges—St. Ambrose we christened him—saw nothing, and went on his way rejoicing, now defying the time-honoured injunction, and airing his views to the man at the wheel, and now talking to the pompous little High Commissioner in so democratic a strain that his hair almost stood on end.

I had to soothe Mrs. Nelson a great deal, for I discovered she was the sort of woman to fly out, avow her love for me before everyone, and then perhaps fling her arms round my neck, and shriek out her determination of never leaving me. Now publicity is my abhorrence, and such a proceeding, though highly dramatic and interesting to the spectators, would have no charms for me whatever. I was therefore highly grateful

when, without any unpleasantness of this sort occurring, the time arrived for me to land. I watched my goods and chattels disappear over the side, and then followed them apprehensive of a scene at the eleventh hour ; but at last I saw with relief Mrs. Nelson's pale, troubled face disappear amongst waving handkerchiefs, and the stentorian 'God speed you's' and 'God bless you's' that St. Ambrose showered upon me.

When I reflected on the matter afterwards, I was convinced that the more pleasant and enjoyable the sin, the more annoyance and trouble it is likely to cause you, for, in addition to my uneasiness lest Mrs. Nelson's emotional nature should overcome her common sense, whenever I met her husband I experienced a good many of the sensations that must have been felt by Judas Iscariot.

CHAPTER VI.

I ONLY stayed a few days at Natal, as there was a boat returning, and I was anxious to return to England, for I missed Mrs. Nelson a great deal. When I went on board, I began to realize my loneliness more than ever. In the secluded corners where she, with feminine intuition, would have been waiting for me, I found no one, and I was so disgusted with life in general, that the attentions of a Cape beauty, an heiress, and bearing in her phlegmatic Dutch face evident traces of her descent, had no attraction for me, and she must have thought me the most listless and *distract* of created mortals.

The passage seemed interminable, and, lover

of the sea as I am, fairest mistress as I consider it, with its ever-varying capriciousness, its infinite variety of charm and expression, I welcomed the unsavoury Thames as eagerly as any returning emigrant, and the train that carries me to London is not so swift as my desires. The smartest hansom I can find bears me off through the streets, which your genuine *flâneur* loves more ardently than many a patriot does the land he professes to be so anxious to free, and before long I am deposited at my chambers.

Here I find a note from Blanche Haviland, saying she has gone to stay at Woodsleigh Towers, away in the Midlands. Of course, I must go, too ; and there was a letter from Mrs. Fawcett, her hostess, inviting me in that aggravatingly take-it-for-granted style, as if I were a mere appendage to Blanche, already fettered at the end of a big chain, and where she was, there I must be also.

Blanche's letter was like herself, elegantly expressed and gracefully worded, with as much warmth as was in her nature infused into it. Was she human, a creature of passions and errors, this cold flawless piece of perfection? Could she be amenable to the raptures and throes of love? or, more likely, that well-regulated organ, her heart, would not beat a shade faster, and her frame never experience any pleasure from the divinest of all sensations—the soft touch of a lover's kiss. Perhaps beneath that polished mask of ice lay a volcano of passion, but that Blanche could ever raise her voice to an unladylike height, or move a shade faster than she had been drilled to do, I could never believe.

I sit and ponder over a large Partaga and some cognac, largely diluted, for I have to be careful still, and then I toil at this record. Comfortable as are the appointments of a well-found steamer, *dulce domum* has many

charms, and now I must again leave them and fly to my betrothed's side, a bondage which ought to be sweet and enthralling, but, alas ! it has grown no more attractive. The painful consciousness that I shall have to mind my *p*'s and *q*'s, to use a homely expression, when I am with Blanche in no way enlivens me ; and instead of the happiness I ought to feel at seeing her again, I experience a most decided disinclination for her strait-laced society, and her affection that has as much fire in it as that of a *dame du mode* for a husband of two or three years' standing.

It is a good thing, and praiseworthy, this cultivated, cold high-mindedness, this nobility of thought and action ; but my Bohemian sympathies fairly crave for a little humanity, something less angelically perfect, something akin to the roses and raptures of vice, as opposed to these hateful and eternal lilies and

languors of virtue, which always make me feel like a schoolboy up for an examination. The prospect of always existing with one whom you look on as your superior, and whose presence always makes you feel small and insignificant, is not a very happy one. Perpetual propriety of behaviour ! Ugh ! One might as well be a convict or take the vows !

Yet I had entered on this entanglement gaily and thoughtlessly, with the absurd vanity of the age just beyond hobbledehoyhood. Thinking myself irresistible, I determined that this haughty and *difficile* beauty should be mine. My one aim was to hear her lovely lips declare her love for me, and, to do this, I had to compete with the other men of her set, who were as constant in their attendance upon her as the sunflower to the sun. I succeeded slowly and almost imperceptibly, but then I was interested. When the moment of victory came, my heart did not

beat as high as I expected, but now my love seems turned to dust and ashes.

Yet what a fool I am ! The best chance that will ever come in my way, and one that plenty of men in my position would be only too proud to wrest from my grasp, and I am dissatisfied with my own good fortune. I always used to think that, when I married, I should like to be really and truly in love with my wife, and this is the end of my dreams. If it had only been poor little Vera ! and I sigh involuntarily, although in Mrs. Nelson's society I have contrived to forget her.

Woodsleigh Towers.

The fates have played me a nice trick. Just as I had made up my mind to kiss the rod and accept my gilded slavery, to make the fatal plunge into matrimony, and get it over quickly, as a child does a nauseous dose of medicine, who should make her appearance,

and knock all my good intentions effectually on the head, who but my own darling Vera! and I love her more than ever.

I had quite forgotten Blanche's promise to offer her a home as companion, if she could not obtain a situation. I knew Vera's welfare was safe in Blanche Haviland's hands after the latter had given her promise — safe, in fact, as you are in an Arab's tent after its owner has eaten bread and salt with you, and I had troubled myself no more. It never occurred to me that Vera would be at Woodsleigh, and meeting her face to face was a shock to me, that in my convalescent state was hard to face properly ; but it told me unmistakably where my affection really was given, and revealed to me like a lightning flash what a distasteful and wretched union I should make with Blanche, unblessed and unbrightened by the glamour of love. What were her perfections and her thousands to me beside that

small irregular face, whose smile seemed the sunshine of life ?

It happened in this wise. One morning I made my way to Blanche's boudoir, which, *en suite* with two other rooms, was situated on the garden front of the Towers—for she was an honoured guest, and I always felt as if I should be known merely as 'Blanche Haviland's husband,' not a *rôle* one would choose, certainly. I knocked at the door for admission, and her clear high-pitched tones answered back, 'Come in,' so I went in accordingly.

By the window, at a little buhl Louis XIV. table, covered with painting materials, sat Blanche, and Vera—my Vera !

I tried to pretend to myself I had not seen her, but it was useless, and with my head swimming and pulses throbbing, I advanced slowly, step by step, with my gaze riveted on her. Something of the hungry yearning expression in her eyes must have magnetized

me, for I could not take mine from hers, as, almost trembling with the knowledge that before me was the one and only woman in the whole world whom I loved, I remarked with lame and feeble jocularities :

‘So glad to find you, Blanche darling ; and how industrious ! I am ashamed of myself.’

Was it fancy, or did a little pained scornful look come into Vera’s eyes, as if she knew well the insincerity of that word ‘darling’ ?

Then, with an affectation of indifference I was far from feeling, I went on, ‘Is that you, Miss Marchmont ? And pray what are you doing at Woodsleigh Towers ?’

Blanche interposed before Vera could reply, and in as acid a tone as good breeding, still further restrained by her own calm superiority, could assume, remarked, ‘It is a good thing my word is better than your memory, my

dear Bertie ; but surely you cannot have forgotten ?'

'Oh no,' I replied, remembering suddenly, and then with studied carelessness I continued, 'I owe you a thousand thanks, and—er—er—you have found her a congenial companion,' I blundered on, pointing to the paints and palettes and brushes.

I hated the idea of my Vera being in servitude of any kind, however light the yoke ; but I have no doubt that, had she belonged to me, I might have let her make a slave of herself to a much greater extent than Blanche would have been capable of ; but then that would be only natural in one of the lords of creation.

Vera spoke up brightly, but without looking at me, 'Oh, Mr. Clifford, I can never thank you and dear Miss Haviland enough. I could not tell you how kind she has been to me.'

‘Stay, my dear Vera,’ interposed Blanche in that cool, lofty, superior tone I dislike so intensely, ‘I am very glad to have been of service to you, but I would rather not be thanked effusively. It is enough for me to know that you are contented and happy, and now let us change the subject. What has Mrs. Fawcett in store for us this morning?’

‘Oh, a drive, and an impromptu picnic at a ruined castle not far away. You will come, won’t you, Blanche? or I shall not care to go.’

I felt the very prince of hypocrites as I said this; but all is fair in love and war, and I must not arouse Blanche’s suspicions, as I was determined to see Vera, and win her for my own if I could. How I hated myself, and how contemptible I must have looked in the eyes of the woman I loved, descending to such base subterfuges, when I ought to have taken her in my arms boldly, and defied Blanche and the world to part us!

How is it Blanche so often succeeds in discouraging and putting down almost everyone's ideas but her own? Is it her own greater intellectuality of mind and insight that foresees their failings? She makes answer vivaciously to my speech.

‘ You know I detest everything impromptu, and especially scrambling meals. The *méringues* always get mixed up with the *foie gras*, the pepper gets into something, and the claret or the corkscrew is sure to be forgotten.’

I ventured to remind her of one or two pleasant little impromptu excursions we had had together in town, but I again got the worst of it.

‘ Yes, but it is quite a different matter when there is a Star and Garter *chef* to arrange the *menu*, and you must own it is more than annoying, after a long drive that has given you an appetite, to find a *mêlée* of

broken victuals that you would hardly offer a beggar.'

There was reason in this, for Blanche had been born with a gold spoon in her mouth, and any idea of Bohemian roughing it was quite foreign to her nature.

I was piqued at her refusal, but I was nothing loath to escape scrambling over ivy-clad ruins to the detriment of patent leathers built for Pall Mall, and one's personal appearance generally ; for, not being an ardent sportsman, I must confess to a strong aversion to wearing boots that would beat Hodge the day-labourer's for thickness, and in which the 'line of beauty' is conspicuous by its absence.

I resigned myself therefore to a morning in her boudoir, and was wondering whether I dare venture to profane the sanctuary with a cigar in order to bear more philosophically with the polite snubs I knew I should have to

endure, when to my relief Blanche said, with a soupçon of malice :

‘No, Bertie, we can’t allow you to stay here. The smell of the paints must be bad for an invalid, and you will hinder us, for our work requires close attention. Go, butterfly,’ she added playfully ; ‘flutter where you will until dinner time, and if you go to the picnic, don’t get your feet wet and take cold !’

She waved me from her presence with as much grace as a queen, with a sable pencil for a sceptre, could assume.

To say I was glad is but a feeble expression for my feelings, for it was little short of torture to have to sit at Blanche’s feet uttering tender commonplaces, with Vera listening all the time, and condemning me most likely as a cold-hearted mercenary wretch.

Anything was better than that, and, armed with a cigar, I went for a walk, thanking my stars devoutly for the deliverance. I had not a

thought for Blanche, save how to plan a *tête-à-tête* with Vera without her knowledge, and this was by no means easy, for Blanche, just and kind as she was to her dependents, was decidedly exacting.

Posing as an invalid in a modest sort of way, it was easy enough for me to escape the picnic on my own behalf, so I wandered about the grounds shamelessly, for, as that estimable but useless animal, an engaged man, I could not be expected to do escort duty to another fair one, especially when my *fiancée* was such a *persona grata* at the Towers.

I saw the cavalcade starting, and as one carriage passed me, a saucy, laughing young face owned by Miss Marion Beauchamp, the life of the house, and to whom any liberty was allowed, looked at me with interest and pretended concern. Then she burst out laughing, and exclaimed :

Fie! Mr. Clifford; how can you desert Miss

Haviland?' and then, with a decided wink at the rest of the party, she went on, ' Oh, I see now, you look glum—a lovers' quarrel, of course. Fly, faithless one, and heal the breach.'

I made some laughing response, and the carriage sped onward, leaving me to my reflections, and those none of the pleasantest.

Bound to Blanche I was by honour, and every tie I could think of, and yet no convicted criminal ever saw the prison doors opening before him with more aversion than I contemplated being compelled to undergo her society, even for the conventional month, let alone the rest of our natural lives; for even in the most ultra *mariage à la mode* you must see something of your wife, and the more especially when you owe so much to her as I should do.

Then, when I thought of Vera, darling little Vera's piquant face, and her bright odd winning manner, that made me feel instinc-

tively at home with her, it appeared seraphic bliss to picture her always by my side after the lofty superiority, and the ice-like propriety of Blanche, who seemed above mere mortal failings, and could hardly comprehend the existence of them in others.

It was no use to argue with myself that I was a Lovelace, a faithless creature who loves and then rides away. Our engagement was of old standing ; it had been recognised, criticized, sat in judgment on, and sanctioned. All my friends considered me a lucky dog ; and although I am not, I hope, detestably mercenary, I did not like to throw up this Eldorado, this match that was so advantageous in every point except the sentimental one. If I did, where could I hide my diminished head ? I should be able to show nowhere ; I should be a pariah, an outcast from all those circles where, as Blanche's intended husband, I had been received and made much of.

The middle course was plain, but I did not feel base enough for that, and even if I could have persuaded Vera to accede to my wishes, it was a repulsive idea to start married life with the dual existence entailed by 'a separate establishment.'

Vera was not likely to play Marguerite to my Faust, and the worst of my own set, who could have counted as many victims to their seductive arts as an Indian chief counts his scalps, and with whom little vagaries with Mdle. Fonblanque, or Miss Geraldine Vavasour, *née* Jones or Tompkins in Whitechapel, were common every-day occurrences, even these made a clean sweep of their *maîtresses* before embarking on the troubled waters of matrimony; while my only chance of happiness, it seemed to me, was to assume these responsibilities, in addition to those that marrying Blanche would cause me.

Verily, I am impaled on the horns of

a dilemma, and yet I will not, I cannot, sacrifice my Vera for Blanche. I could marry the latter, and then approach Vera with fair words and the worst of intentions, if I was desperate enough, but my little Vera has too much innate honesty of character to listen to proposals which must be insulting, however worded, when coming from another woman's husband.

I might assume the common or garden virtue of honesty, and marry the woman I love—but what then? I have always been used to the little refinements and enjoyments of life. I am selfish enough to know I should be unhappy without them ; and why should I drag Vera down to, perhaps, a garret, and a troop of squalling brats ?—a state of things in which no love could survive long. Besides which, my own affairs, owing to persistent doing of little bills, and getting up behind others of equally impecunious and similarly

obliging friends, are by no means in a prosperous condition. *Hinc illæ lachrymæ!* Were I Cræsus, how easy my duty would be!

One thing is certain, I can't temporize much longer. Blanche is expecting to be married soon, and everyone is asking her when the happy event is coming off; and, diplomatize as I will, the time is at hand when we must make some definite announcement. However, see Vera I must, and will.

CHAPTER VII.

THAT evening, after dressing for dinner, I was passing through one of the corridors on my way downstairs when I met Vera. At sight of me she seemed to shrink back, but, mastering herself, she came forward with an indifference that I knew was feigned. Her cold 'good evening' was drowned in my impatient, impetuous words :

'Vera, I have wanted to see you, to speak to you particularly. Tell me when you are at liberty ; I have so much to say to you !'

She replied in a pained tone :

'You can have nothing to say to me in private, and you must not call me Vera. It

is treachery to Miss Haviland, who is so kind and good to me, even for me to speak to you at all.'

'This is trifling,' I rejoined roughly. 'What I have to say to you is of the last importance. You loved me once ; you must grant me this request—an interview, not a long one, and when and where you will—but see you I must.'

Just then a footstep was heard coming in the distance, and this seemed to decide her in my favour, for she said hurriedly :

'Well, if you must, I will be in the path in the shrubbery to-morrow morning at half-past eight.'

'Don't fail me,' I said impressively, and then, as the footsteps drew nearer and nearer behind us, I added the most commonplace remark about the beauty of the Towers.

It was Blanche's maid, but, providentially, Blanche was not one to listen to servants'

gossip, or encourage any familiarity that might lead to disclosures concerning me.

Blanche had a good deal of that royal condescension that would let the world get properly aired before venturing out, so I knew our interview would be safe from her interference. *Pour moi*, the worm that went out too early, and got caught, has always had my heartfelt sympathy ; but to meet Vera I would have arisen at sunrise, and the trysting-place saw us arrive punctually on the morrow with a coincidence that would be suspicious to any observant eyes.

‘ Vera darling !’ I exclaimed.

And after a hasty glance round I would have taken her in my arms, for I was hungering for a touch of her lips ; but she repulsed me with a gentle dignity and a surprise that must have been assumed. Love in your own heart imbues you with a peculiar prescience of your loved one’s feelings, places you *en*

rapport, as the mesmerists say, and thus, knowing her own feelings and mine, how could she have been surprised at the impulse that prompted me to seize her and stifle her with kisses?

‘Mr. Clifford!’ she said, in indignant but tremulous tones.

‘Call me Bertie,’ I interpolated, ‘as you once did.’

This was an unlucky speech of mine, for while it was intended to evoke tender recollections of the past, it only recalled to her mind the unhappiness that was the result of our love.

‘I shall do nothing of the sort!’ she exclaimed with spirit; ‘and you ought not to bring me here to say such things to me. What would Miss Haviland think? You are behaving abominably to her by pretending to care for me, and if she knew of it, I should lose the kindest friend I ever had.’

‘Vera,’ I pleaded, ‘you know my love for you is no pretence.’

‘Pretence or not, what does it matter?’ She gave a little dry, bitter laugh that told me how she felt on the subject, and continued: ‘When you are married to Miss Haviland, you will soon forget all about me. I am content with my lot, and everyone cannot have happiness, I suppose. Why do you persecute me just for your own amusement?’

‘Vera,’ I cried hotly, ‘you are unjust! I swear to you——’

‘Nonsense!’ she interrupted, with a wintry little smile; ‘go and swear eternal constancy to the woman you are going to marry. She deserves it, for she is one of the best of her sex.’

‘The devil take her!—no, I don’t mean that,’ I ejaculated. ‘Listen, Vera: I love you; you know I love you. My circumstances

are not such as I could ask you to share as my wife, for how can I, loving you as I do, drag you down into genteel poverty? In your present position you have a good home and every luxury, even if you are dependent upon someone's pleasure; but as the wife of a poor, struggling professional man, with, perhaps, several mouths to feed, life would be unendurable; besides which, hampered as I should be, there would be no brighter prospect in store for us. You can understand that ?

‘ Perfectly—so well, in fact, that I ask what you want with me.’

‘ Nay, Vera, help me out. What am I to do? The prospect of a loveless union with Blanche inspires me with despair, and yet there is no other alternative open to me.’

‘ Then,’ she replied dramatically and scornfully, ‘ your presence here is a double dishonour! You insult me by forcing on

me your illicit love, while in the same breath you avow your determination to marry Miss Haviland ; and to her, as your betrothed, your conduct is the basest treachery imaginable ! I will listen no longer !'

I could have laughed at such tragedy, but the situation was too serious, and, intent on my purpose, I wanted to impress on her mind the main fact that I loved her, in the hope that the seed might fall upon good ground. So I said :

'Nothing was further from my thoughts than to insult you. Only remember, Vera, my darling, that I love you ; I love you as passionately and fondly as I believe you do me, and if it pains you to see me the husband of another, is it nothing for me to suffer, to be deprived of you, to have to simulate affection that is false, and pleasure where I am unhappy ?'

Vera yielded a little.

‘No, I will believe you. Perhaps I spoke too harshly, but we must end this.’

‘Dearest,’ I implored, ‘can’t even your woman’s wit see some way out of our difficulties?’

‘No, it is impossible—and I must be going; good-bye.’

She glided away and disappeared in the depths of the shrubbery before I had time to remonstrate.

Returning to the house, with the usual perversity of human fortunes, I of course encountered Blanche Haviland, graceful, self-possessed, perfectly dressed, and with the same exalted, kind, but aggravating smile. I kissed her with the chastest possible of caresses, which she accepted graciously and condescendingly, and then, with a sprightly but dignified surprise, she asked :

‘And pray, Bertie dear, on what errand are you bent at this unearthly hour? Has

your watch stopped, that you have risen with the lark by mistake, or have you taken to reading law before breakfast? Lastly, but I hope not, are you ill?’

‘No, my dear Blanche, thank you; nor can I plead guilty to any of the other motives you would attribute to me. I was in bed early, and could not sleep this morning.’

This was anything but the truth, for I had stayed in the smoking-room so late the previous night, that it was only cold water *ad libitum* that had brought me up to time to see Vera.

‘Well, Bertie, early rising is very healthy and appropriate in the country.’ And then, looking at me quizzically as I thought, she added, ‘I wonder if any similar feeling has attacked Miss Marchmont, for she was not in her room when Lisette called me.’

‘I am not Miss Marchmont’s keeper,’ I answered laughingly, ‘and therefore I cannot

say, and you will believe me, darling Blanche, I am too much concerned for your happiness to have a thought for anyone else's. But I met her last night, and she told me how good you had been to her. It is just like your own kind noble self, and I want to thank you sincerely for granting my request, although I was ungrateful enough to have forgotten it.'

'Oh, it is nothing, and when you ask me a greater favour, you will not find me unwilling to grant it.'

Very often I felt myself driven to respect Blanche, to almost worship her, but in the same way as you would worship an angel or a god; that is, as a very high and exalted creature of perfection, whose every action you admired and thought beyond all praise, but a being for whom you could never feel mortal love, from whom you would never long for passionate embraces, and melting tenderness, or the rapture of gratified desires, but as one

who was superior to earthly weaknesses, whom you would canonize, and to whose memory you would erect a statue. And it was so now. I felt how little I deserved the precious boon she was even now offering me—herself—and how little I desired it.

‘Blanche, darling, I often feel so much your inferior, that, even longing as I do to possess you for my own, I almost dread our marriage, lest you should find out too late how unworthy of you I am in every respect, how undeserving of the happiness that has fallen to my lot.’

This is conscience speaking out for once.

‘Not a very lover-like speech, Bertie,’ says my *fiancée*, evidently wondering that anyone, even myself, should presume to question the wisdom of her choice.

‘But, my dearest, I am often really overwhelmed at my good fortune. You are so different to other women, so far their superior

morally and intellectually, that I hesitate to take this fair image from its pedestal to pollute it with my rude earthly touch.'

'Come, Bertie,' she replied, a little impatiently, 'we have often discussed this question before. You may relinquish these qualms of conscience, which, if they do you credit, are rather quixotic. I am not a young and thoughtless girl, to bestow my love on the first man I see, and if I am satisfied, surely you may be so too.'

This was said significantly, and if Blanche were anything but the well-bred woman of the world that she is, I might have reason to fear that the advantages which are on her side would some day be thrown in my teeth. If she only knew the true state of affairs, she would not stigmatize my reluctance as quixotic.

Two days afterwards I had another short interview with Vera, which was interrupted

by Blanche's maid. Woe is me ! Shall I kiss that pretty soubrette and offer her a gold piece ? or will that be even more compromising ? I decide not to kiss her, as Blanche would shudder if she heard of it, and her refined temperament would revolt against anything 'so low' ; so I proffer her half a sovereign, which she takes with a most significant twinkle in her eye, as she chirps out :

‘ Ah ! monsieur is so good. He can depend upon my discretion.’

‘ A fico for your discretion,’ I thought ; ‘ the story will soon be common property in the servants’ hall ; but, if it only does not reach Blanche’s ears, no matter, and my reputation for gallantry will surely allow me a little flirtation with an ex-governess of rather piquant appearance.’ And the crisis was coming fast ; I must do something to extricate myself.

At last I managed to get Vera to myself again. It was a fine evening, and with an apology for leaving the men immediately dinner was over, I met her at one end of the terrace, and walking along, I begged her to listen to me.

I had no fresh arguments to use. I could only assure her of my undying love, and she was more yielding than before : her love had grown up with my presence near to her ; but still she was inflexible.

‘Leave me,’ she begged ; ‘you know it is impossible. As a man of honour and a gentleman, I beseech you not to tempt me !’

‘Vera,’ I replied cynically, ‘I call myself a gentleman, but I am very doubtful whether I ought to claim the character of honourable. See, I tell you my faults ; I love you so much, I will not even attempt to deceive you. Are we to be parted for ever, you and I, who were made for one another, because circumstances

compel me to marry Miss Haviland? Are we to live on in the desolate hopeless gloom of knowing that our lives have been wrecked, and that by our own folly? that we have thrown away the happiness that might have been ours, and that the heaven of love has been turned into the hell of despair?’

I spoke forcibly, for I felt what I said.

‘Bertie!’—and the cry was wrung from her as if she were in physical pain—‘don’t torture me; you don’t know what I am suffering. See, I kneel to you—I implore you not to make my burden heavier to bear.’

She was terribly emotional in her love for me; she had actually thrown herself on her knees, and was pleading through a rain of tears, while I felt like the villain I was. But I loved her, and could not give her up.

A moment after, unnoticed by us at first, so absorbed were we, we saw people approaching us. The night was fine, and some indi-

vidual, whom I could cheerfully have shot, had proposed a walk on the terrace. They had seen us, and from our attitude had mistaken Vera for a village girl on her knees, imploring one of the men-servants, who was the cause of her shame, to marry her. The faster spirits thereupon proposed to go and investigate matters.

We were caught in a trap, and escape was impossible, for there was no outlet from the terrace at that end. Fortunately it was rather dark, and I hastily whispered to Vera :

‘ Dry your eyes, keep in the shadow, seem as if nothing had happened, and talk about theatricals.’

I was anxious to put as good a face on the situation as possible, for all our sakes, but especially to spare her. Blanche was constituted of such supreme self-importance, that she would not conceive it possible that anyone could play her false.

In another moment the Philistines were upon us ! Vera had dashed the tears from her eyes, and, plucky little girl that she was, had pulled herself together very well. The first couple that reached us were a man named Copeland and the Miss Beauchamp I mentioned before.

Staring at us rudely through a monster eyeglass, she gave a start of surprise, and said :

‘ Mr. Clifford, indeed. You wicked man !’ and she playfully tapped me with her glasses. ‘ But who is the incognita ?’

I drew myself up stiffly, and replied :

‘ I don’t understand you, Miss Beauchamp. This lady here, Miss Marchmont, has been good enough to show me her rendering of a part in a little comedietta that she is familiar with, and that we are talking of getting up. May we count on you to help us ?’

‘ Oh yes, do, Miss Beauchamp. There is

one character that would suit you so well,' joined in Vera, in quite a lively tone considering all things, taking my cue as beautifully as possible.

There had been, luckily for us, a talk of attempting some theatricals, so our excuse served very well ; but, of course, Vera, from her dependent position, although treated very well by everyone out of consideration for her, and at Blanche's example and request, would not have had much voice in the matter ; but people have not always time to think of these little inconsistencies in 'a fish story.'

The affair passed over for the time, and that was a great point gained. Tide over the crisis, and you have something to be thankful for, for there is time then to study how to avert the next catastrophe. Blanche kept up her usual dignified attitude, as if the whole thing were too trivial to be worth her attention. Would she ever be capable of

similar emotion ? would she ever break her heart over a man ? I don't fancy so.

I evaded Blanche as well as I could for the remainder of the evening, but the outspoken free-and-easy Beauchamp girl got possession of me, and said with laughing maliciousness :

‘ Bravo ! *mon ami* ; very cleverly done indeed, but still wanting. Comedies are usually played in drawing-rooms, not in the street with the lady in the attitude of a Magdalen.’

‘ Call it a tragedy then, if you would rather,’ I laughed ; ‘ but the incident was absurd enough without being made more of. Will you let it drop, for my sake ?’

We had had some little love passages, so I held out my hand, and gave her an eloquent look that Blanche would by no means have thought necessary, expressive as it was of much admiration. Coquette as Marion was, she dropped her eyes, and gently pressing my hand, said in a very different tone, ‘ Yes.’

Copeland, a cad, presently button-holed me in the smoking-room.

‘I say, Clifford, dear boy, you looked deucedly funny on the terrace to-night. Ha, ha! not sworn at Highgate, eh—prefer the maid to the mistress? What’s your little game?’

‘What the devil is that to you?’

I spoke fiercely and abruptly, hoping to put an end to this nuisance, but Copeland was obtuse.

‘So it wasn’t all gospel about the comedietta? Well, the Marchmont is a jolly little party.’

This was beyond forbearance, and I put my foot down at once and sharply. I said haughtily :

‘I am not in the habit of having my word doubted, Copeland, and if you or anyone else are inclined to do so, you had certainly better not tell me to my face, or I won’t answer for the consequences.’

I turned on my heel, leaving him the picture of blank astonishment. A friend of mine told me he sat out the remainder of the evening gasping indignantly to himself : ' D——n it, what next—d——n it, can't chaff a fellow about a pretty girl—d——d conceited ass—should like to punch his head !'

The next morning I had a summons to Blanche's boudoir, whither I repaired in no pleasant frame of mind, as I did not know how she had taken my plausible explanation. Was it fancy, or was she sitting in quite a judicial attitude, awaiting the delinquent, myself? Well, for Vera's sake, I would eat humble-pie.

She soon opened fire.

' My dear Bertie, I have sent for you to have a quiet talk about last night's occurrence, which, I must own, rather annoyed me. Miss Marchmont is gone to Mrs. Charrington's room for me, so we can talk uninterruptedly.'

‘Naturally, my dearest Blanche, I regret it as much as you can, and the more so, because it was very unfortunate for Miss Marchmont, who was also involved in it.’

‘Never mind Miss Marchmont,’ rejoined my *fiancée*, with more asperity than her wont. ‘I should be glad if you would explain to me again, and more particularly, how it happened.’

‘Of course, Blanche, I shall be glad to do so, in order to save myself and Miss Marchmont from any misconception.’

‘You seem more concerned about Miss Marchmont than anything,’ retorted Blanche warmly.

Good heavens ! Can this be my Blanche, usually so calm and self-contained ? Is it possible that she has a heart, and more, that she is actually condescending to let a bit of it peep out ; that she is, in fact, suffering from the vulgar *bourgeois* passion of jealousy,

which she has often assured me is impossible to the cultivated and well regulated-mind ?

I tell her the whole story I have concocted with a cool impudence that astonishes me. I can bear the gaze of those calm steady orbs without flinching ; but I could not tell little honest bright-eyed Vera falsehoods with the same equanimity.

I relate how I left the table, not feeling well, and going on to the terrace in search of fresh air, I had met Miss Marchmont, who was on the same errand. Blanche must know it had not been a rendezvous, or we should hardly have chosen so public a trysting-place. I could not resist the temptation of putting this in to see the effect, and the result was not flattering, for her eyes opened lazily to their full extent, and she said, laughing the while :

‘ Why, Bertie, how could you think of anything so absurd ! I hardly imagine it

likely anyone would prefer Miss Marchmont's society to my own, especially my affianced husband ; or, if such an impossible thing did happen, I think my friends here have sufficient respect for me to put any recurrence of it out of the question.'

' But if such a supposition had occurred to anyone else ?'

' There are always malicious people,' this in the superior, lofty, didactic style, ' who take a delight in scandal and backbiting, but I really think we are above that kind of thing. Still, it is annoying for you to have given anyone an opportunity for calumny.'

I went on to say that, on meeting Miss Marchmont, we had commenced a conversation on the subject of private theatricals. She was enthusiastic, and insisted on showing me how some star had rendered the title *rôle* in a comedietta. I, of course, was interested, and forgot the ludicrous figure we must have

cut to outside beholders ; but this I only now admitted in an offhand way, as who should say it was not perfectly natural for conscious virtue in the shape of a young and interesting woman to be kneeling and almost bathing with her tears the feet of a young man whose moral character was—well, not what it ought to have been.

Blanche listened to my story coldly, now and again speaking with an inflection of contempt in her voice, but what did it matter to me ? I was looking forward to wronging her deeply, and if she was living on in a fool's paradise, why should I disturb it just for the sake of losing my temper ?

Finally she said : ‘ Well, I must say it was foolish of you to put yourself and Miss Marchmont in such a position, and although the circumstance is almost too trivial to be worth mentioning, yet it is vexing for me when you make yourself ridiculous, as, from

our relationship, it partly reflects on me; but still I think I can trust to your discretion not to repeat such a *bêtise*.'

I hate being lectured, and I answered sharply :

'You may rely upon that, I can assure you. . And really, Blanche, as we were quite unintentionally to blame in the matter, it is not worth discussing further. I hope Miss Marchmont has not experienced any inconvenience or annoyance.'

'It was most decidedly unwise of her,' replied Blanche, 'to subject herself and you to any chance of scandal, for it never seems to have occurred to you what a supremely silly thing you were doing; and I have thought it my duty to point out to her that she was much in fault, and how she had better avoid anything of the kind in future, as her conduct was open to misconception with anyone of less cool judgment than myself.'

‘Don’t be hard on her, Blanche, dearest,’ I urged; ‘she is only young, and has had a good deal of trouble; it is different with me.’

Blanche looked at me with mild surprise, and replied :

‘You certainly seem to take an extraordinary interest in Miss Marchmont, which I am quite unable to account for.’

‘Hang it all!’ I said, losing my temper, ‘can’t a fellow have charity enough to be sorry for a girl in an awkward position?’

‘Of course’—this with admirable coolness; ‘but I must say I never heard you urge the claims of suffering humanity so strongly before.’

Blanche’s coolness is exasperating, but I gulp down my rising temper, as I don’t want to betray the slightest indication that I care for Vera.

‘No, Blanche darling, but you know I have never had occasion to do so before, for

you are so good to everyone about you. Let us forget that this troublesome incident ever had any existence. Come, dear, forgive me, and let us be happy again with one another.'

So we gave ourselves up to what is vulgarly known as spooning, and spent a good part of the morning in that interesting amusement—I hope to Blanche's satisfaction, certainly not to mine. But I smoothed down my ladyship's ruffled plumes, so what matter?

I met that confounded Lisette, Blanche's maid, again. With the natural impudence of a young and pretty girl, she stopped and accosted me with an odd mixture of fun, malice, and penetration peeping out of her eye-corners.

'*Ah, monsieur, quel malheur*, that you be seen with Mees Marchmont ! and Mees Haviland *si jalouse*—jealous, you call it.'

'Nonsense, Lisette, that is too absurd,' I replied airily and incredulously.

‘*Mais oui, monsieur,*’ retorted Lisette, with emphasis, shaking her head ominously, and then she vanished before I could even attempt to secure her good offices.

CHAPTER VIII.

Woodsleigh Towers—a month later.

MY diary, my Father Confessor ! *Peccavi !*
I have done it at last. My conscience feels easier, though, in spite of the fact that Vera is living under ‘my protection.’ Providence has been good to me in another way, or shall I say the devil has helped his own again ? The end of my career unassisted by Blanche Haviland’s money was rapidly drawing near. Bills *and* their renewals, a few injudicious operations on ‘Change, and ‘dead snips’ on the turf, besides an earnest and persevering attempt generally to live beyond my means, had done their work, and would, I should say,

if persistently and prayerfully continued, play havoc even with Rothschild or Vanderbilt millions, so that my sun was in a fair way to set, or be extinguished altogether, when who should die quietly and unexpectedly but my mother.

Peace to her ashes ! The property I inherited from her came in the nick of time—it was monetary rehabilitation, just when I needed it badly. My solicitor, who before then would not advance me £50 in the world—being so short of money—now might have Pactolus itself flowing through his offices. He finds me what I require cheerfully now, doubtless thinking the quicker I get through it, the sooner I shall want more, which means mortgages and other pickings for him. But *revenons à nos moutons*, or I shall spin this narrative out to an interminable length.

Three days after I wrote last there was another picnic excursion. Blanche, even after

our reconciliation, had shown me marked coolness, and I began to believe Lisette's story of her jealousy. I asked her to accompany me, but she declined in a way that ruffled my dignity, and thinking her quite ignorant of any wrong-doing on my part, I assumed the air of injured innocence, and assured her of my complete indifference. I laughingly declined all invitations, and went out into the grounds in a very bad temper, for I must own to a shocking one at times.

I brightened up at the sight of Vera, whom I saw approaching me, wrapped in thought, and wearing a sad expression instead of her usual bright, cheerful one. How I longed to clasp her in my arms, and kiss away every line that grief was causing in her face.

'Mr. Clifford—Bertie!' she exclaimed with a start, as I took her unresisting hands in mine. She looked unutterably sad, and began in mournful tones: 'Do forgive me for my

unpardonable folly of the other night, which has caused so much trouble !'

'Vera,' I interrupted fiercely, 'this is no time for conventional apologies. Blanche has not gone to Aldred's tower with the others, but she is safe for a time. Go down the road as if to the village, and meet me in the Hollow Plantation. I will go there through the park. But be careful of Lisette, although, after all, it doesn't matter much if she does see you. We must put an end to this. Not a word—go at once !'

Something in my manner influenced her, for she went obediently, and I started off too, my mind a tumult of conflicting passions, but my thoughts on the way took a definite resolution. Vera must be mine at whatever sacrifice.

With my mind preoccupied I sped along so rapidly that, although I had nearly double the distance to traverse, I reached the coppice

first. No lovers' trysting-place, no conspirators' rendezvous, could have been better adapted for our meeting. A belt of trees, sufficiently bare of undergrowth to allow us to detect anyone's approach, while thick, detached bushes afforded us a screen, surrounded a hollow, which had once been a pond, but now was drained and dried up. Here two or three felled and prostrate trees allowed the tender, diffident maiden to sit by her lover, and gradually nestle closer to his side, encircled by his protecting arm, while Venus and Cupid looked on approvingly from the heights of Olympus.

I had not long to wait before I could descry Vera's petite figure stealing along, and in a few moments she was clasped in my arms, and weeping quietly and contentedly on my shoulder. But it was no time for affectionate toying, or the blandishments of lovers.

I gently disengaged her, and in tones in

whose vibrating intensity I hardly recognised my own I began :

‘Vera dearest, there is no time to lose. First tell me your troubles.’

She needed no pressing—she had risen to the occasion, and dried her tears.

‘Oh, Bertie ! it is nothing ; but ever since that dreadful night Miss Haviland has been so cold to me. She has not said as much, but I know she distrusts me, and wants to get rid of me ; and, dear’—this tremulously—‘I know it’s foolish of me, but I can’t bear unkindness. Wherever I have been I have always done my best, and no one has been actually unkind to me before, and I do feel it so much ! I’m sure Miss Haviland knows you care for me, and although she is perfectly just, I can feel I am not wanted, and what is to become of me, I don’t know. I’m sure it isn’t my fault. I have tried to do my duty, and not take you

away from her ; but, of course, she doesn't know that, and I can't explain it—it would only make matters worse.'

'Vera,' I said masterfully, 'you *must* be mine, and yet I tell you I *must* marry Blanche Haviland, or I shall be ruined, and not able to help you or myself!'

'It cannot be—it is impossible!' she said despairingly.

I had to make my meaning clearer, hard as it was to bring shame to that little face I loved so dearly—scoundrel that I felt, but there was no help for it.

'Bertie, you know what you are proposing to me,' Vera said, in a low voice, crimsoning as she spoke ; 'you are asking me to consent to my own shame and misery.'

'I swear to you, Vera,' I interrupted, 'that it is with no selfish desire such as that, that I want you to be my own. I claim the right to protect you, and watch over you in your

troubles, because I love you as if you were a part of myself. Listen to me : I will not seek to plead my cause by the usual sophistries about marriage being merely a conventional tie, and not so necessary to happiness as mutual affection, but I will ask you to trust me.'

'But you would get tired of me, you would cast me off, and then there would be no hope ; and deprived of you, I should go mad.'

'Vera,' I interposed passionately, 'you have known me some time. Do you think I am the sort of man to let you starve or go to the dogs in the way you think? Supposing I were to cease to care for you, as you say, do you think so badly of me as to suppose I should turn you away homeless and friendless, with no resource but the workhouse or the river ?'

'No, I don't think that of you ; you know I don't,' she answered earnestly, as she nestled

up to me with a little confiding motion that set my blood on fire to protect her against all the world.

‘I know I ought to be bitterly ashamed of asking you, and neither is it fit for you to be here listening to such proposals as I have to make ; but you can understand how the circumstances justify them—in some measure, at least. My Vera, how can I see you go away from me, out into the dark, cold, unkind world, that worships nothing but the golden calf ; and you—you poor little waif, to be knocked and buffeted about, meeting with fresh troubles on every hand, while here, darling, you have a safe resting-place, if you will only trust me ; for do you think if my love for you faded—do you think I would be unkind to you ? Look into my eyes, and answer me truly.’

‘No,’ she said, dropping her eyes under my ardent glance ; ‘and you know I would trust

you, for I love you ; but think what you are asking me to do—think of the sacrifice. It is nothing for you—it is an achievement even for a man to betray an innocent, trusting girl—but with me it is my whole life that will be tainted, for my character is my only possession.'

'Vera, my darling,' I said in desperation, 'you shall not say that! you shall not say yours is the only sacrifice! I will show you what I will risk to win you. I will put my honour—nay, more, my liberty—in your hands. We will go to some quiet out-of-the-way place, and be married in assumed names. Then, when I marry Blanche, I shall have committed bigamy, the punishment for which is serious. You alone will be possessed of the secret; and if I prove faithless, you will be able to revenge yourself on Blanche, as well as myself. I will risk this gladly for your dear sake.'

Vera made a *moue* of such intense disgust

that I smiled, in spite of the gravity of the situation.

‘So, knowing you to be my own lawful husband,’ she said, ‘I am to look on complacently, and see you go to the arms of another woman, to bestow on her the kisses that are my right, and never to know but that my rival might be weaning your affection from me! What a prospect, Bertie!’ and her eyes filled with tears.

‘Vera,’ I answered, shrugging my shoulders, ‘one cannot have everything in this world. In the one case, you would have part of my life and all my love; in the other, neither. Choose, and let your love speak for me.’

I was discussing the question now calmly and dispassionately, as if it was quite an everyday matter for a girl to be bartering away her honour. I paused, not for want of language, but to leave the question to her judgment,

having backed up my words by all the eloquence that loving, pleading looks afford.

After a few seconds, Vera answered with passionate energy :

‘I think I could bear it better for Blanche to be your wife. If I knew you were really my husband, I should want to come and tear you away from her arms whenever I knew you were with her.’ Then she faltered, ‘As—your—mistress, I should have to be humble and thankful for whatever love and kindness you bestowed on me.’

‘Vera dearest,’ I remonstrated, ‘you know my love is all yours ; you know I shall grudge every moment spent away from you and with Blanche. I must pretend enough affection to prevent her thinking our marriage is absolutely repugnant to me ; but you know that every loving word I say to her will be addressed to you in my heart. And, my darling,’ I said, clasping her in my arms, and looking straight

down into her shining eyes, 'you have known me long enough to judge! Have you ever heard of my being guilty of any mean, contemptible action? Do you think I would turn a dog from my door if it loved me? and could I find it in my heart to be unkind to you, my little precious Vera? But if you will, I will marry you first, if you mistrust me. Speak, my dearest, and let me know your decision. Will you accept my offer?'

'Bertie, my one and only love,' she answered, looking up at me with clear and penetrating eyes, 'it is noble and generous of you to make it; but why should I be the cause of your committing a crime? I love you, my darling—I trust you, and I will give myself to you. I shall be guilty of a great sin; and if I am punished for it, God help me! But promise me, my love—promise me that if you grow tired of me, you will not add unkindness to faithlessness—that you will not

abandon me to complete despair. I trust you completely ; let me not trust you in vain !'

'Vera, whatever may happen, I swear to you that you shall never be left homeless or penniless ; that, if we are parted, it shall be my care to provide for your wants to the utmost of my ability.'

'Kiss me, Bertie,' she replied fondly, 'my darling, my husband ; for I belong to you from this moment as surely as if the benediction had just been pronounced over us.'

'Vera,' I said solemnly, 'I am yours, and you are indeed mine, and never shall you have reason to repent your trust in me, or may God Himself remember it against me in the hour of my need !'

Vera was a woman of no common mould, and curious as it may strike anyone, I feel no sense of shame as I write these pages ; I am convinced I did what was right.

This is a very wicked and improbable story,

isn't it ? but then you see the worst of it is that it all happened. I did not begin to chronicle the doings of characters that move like puppets, and do nothing but give utterance to pretty moral copy-book aphorisms, and generally behave like the good boy in the children's books. I wanted to paint the life of real flesh and blood, men and women, creatures of passion and impulse, sinful maybe, but of strong vitality, not of the pallid propriety that shapes life by rule and line, and by narrow boundaries of prejudice and 'what people will think.' Easy it is for these pattern people to escape sin.

Of course the bigamy was a *coup de main*, and although I was desperate enough to have committed even that deed—and why not? for dual existences and a plurality of wives are alarmingly common nowadays—I was very glad to abandon the idea when its necessity no longer existed.

It seemed like bathos to come down from the heavenly exaltation of love, and the feverish excitement of our feelings, to discuss the petty details of everyday life, and of such unromantic but indispensable questions as where to live, and what to eat and drink ; but it had to be done. Vera, poor little girl, had very modest ideas on the subject of housekeeping, and seemed to consider my proposals as reckless prodigality. I was relieved a good deal at this, for I was not in a position to support her *en prince*, but then she repeated now and again, 'What do I want, dearest, but you? I could do without everything, if I only had you always with me.' And I was obliged to confess that that was just the one thing I should be able to give her the least of.

Our plans were soon arranged. Mrs. Vaughan would know nothing of her whereabouts, and Vera was alone in the world with this exception, so that no one could interfere

with us. She was to have the fictitious offer of another situation, and, pleading as an excuse Miss Haviland's approaching marriage, was to ask to be allowed to leave at once, and this permission we had no doubt would be readily given. Then, armed with a wedding-ring, Vera was to betake herself to a little quiet country place I knew of, Edenford by name, and giving out that she was the wife of a professional man in town, and had come there for the benefit of her health, was to establish herself as comfortably as our circumstances allowed.

The rest was left to me, and with many assurances of undying affection we separated after several passionate embraces, which we promised ourselves to renew as soon as ever our plans were fulfilled. I made my way back to the Towers, keeping a sharp look-out for Lisette, who, after the manner of her class, instinctively smelt out and enjoyed an intrigue.

Everything worked smoothly after this. Vera alleged the reasons we had decided on, and Blanche was at heart, I firmly believe, glad to see the last of her, and treated her very handsomely in the matter of salary. My timely inheritance provided the sinews of war for Vera's setting out and establishment, as well as the modest outfit I had to insist on her providing for herself; and, through the death of my mother, I can be sure of her having a moderate competence, and she need have no anxiety for the future.

Blanche has become more amiable since Vera's departure, and now I am only seeking a decent pretext to get away for a few days to enjoy the heaven of first possessing my darling all to myself, for she has written to say she is comfortable and happy and longing to see me. I wonder if Lisette can exercise any surveillance over the letter-bag—that girl is capable of anything.

I had almost forgotten to mention to you, my father confessor, who, if you don't give me absolution, at least have the merit of never admonishing me, a letter which reached me the other day, and which was more interesting than agreeable. I do like a liaison, when it is ended, to be ended in reality, and not to be turning up again like an unquiet spirit. When you put *Finis* to your pages, you know they are done; when you do by any chance pay a bill, you feel certain you will not be dunned for it again ; but with women—kittle cattle indeed—it is very different. Why on earth should a flirtation, indulged in to dissipate the ennui of your villeggiatura, not end where your excursion left off, and not come and haunt you afterwards ?

Mrs. Nelson, my *ami du cœur* at sea, was splendid *pour passer le temps* ; but as a possible wife, when I have two candidates for that undesirable post already on my hands, she is

decidedly *de trop*, to say the least of it. The letter only came yesterday, forwarded on from my chambers with a batch of bills and dunning letters, that have as much effect on me as a bandillera on the carapace of a pachyderm, or the hail from a Gatling on the ironclad sides of H.M.S. *Inflexible*.

This is it.

‘R.M.S. *Svendoolah*, off Gravesend.

‘MY DEAR MR. CLIFFORD,

‘You will hardly have forgotten, though no doubt you will be very much surprised’ (‘very’ indeed, and some Saxon expressions yclept unparliamentary were my comment as I read it) ‘to hear from me. My poor husband—but you will see from the enclosed cutting the details I have not fortitude to write—has been taken from me.

‘I am not writing to ask charity at your hands, for I have friends who will keep me

from absolute want ; but you were betrayed into saying when we were together that you had a regard for me deeper than friendship, and I have hoped since my great misfortune, and the consequent change in my position towards you, that you would be disposed to carry out some of the sentiments you expressed to me, when it was out of the question for me to listen to them. Will you grant me an interview, so that I can explain myself better ? You know my address in town. Remember, I count on you.

‘ In haste (the boat is just leaving), believe me,

‘ Your affectionate friend,

‘ GLADYS NELSON.’

Voilà the cutting from the *Natal Mercury* :

‘ We deeply regret to hear that authentic intelligence has reached Potchefstroom which leaves no doubt as to the fate of the Rev.

Ambrose Nelson. After his capture he was kept prisoner for a week, but the 'Tchacha tribe seem to have become exasperated by their defeat near Pietermaritzburg, and on the 16th he was executed after being tortured for two hours. The unfortunate fate of this gentleman will cause a thrill of horror throughout Christendom, and supplies the strongest argument for what we have always so consistently advocated—the complete subjugation of Zululand. It is impossible to avoid paying a sincere tribute to the bravery and self-abnegation of Mr. Nelson, while we cannot but grievously deplore the almost reckless manner in which he risked his life in penetrating into the 'Tchacha territory in spite of urgent and repeated warnings of the danger. We understand that Mrs. Nelson, who is completely prostrated by the sad event, and who has our deepest sympathy, will shortly leave for England.'

Poor Boanerges ! When I remember the simple-minded, single-hearted man, who was of the stuff martyrs are made of, who would have stepped into the breach as cheerfully as Marcus Curtius, and who would have trodden in the footsteps of his great Master, and sacrificed himself for others, saying : ‘Father, forgive them ; for they know not what they do,’ my mind pays a deep and involuntary reverence to his memory, the more so when I reflect on my own life, and think what good he did to mankind, while I—— Alas ! the subject will not bear contemplation. How little she was worthy of him ! but then I was to blame for that, and ‘Judge not, that ye be not judged,’ and ‘People who live in glass houses should never throw stones,’ have been two of my guiding principles in life.

But the letter, *c’est une autre chose*. Its sweet simplicity, its guardedness, its euphemism—‘betrayed into,’ etc., is superb, when Hannen

might have had a say in the matter—and above all, its careful foisting on to my shoulders of the ‘sentiments’ that I had to endure *ad nauseam* when the time came for us to part, are beyond all praise—*i.e.*, in a comedy, or at someone else’s expense, but *in corpore vili* are most damnably embarrassing.

Is Nemesis, after all these years, remembering my existence, that I become the prey instead of the hunter? Why did Boanerges get ‘chawed up’ just at this time, and leave a young and able-bodied woman to come back to England with designs upon me? Nay more, she is evidently hurrying home, trusting my infatuation, as she thinks, has not cooled, and that I shall jump at the chance of taking her to my arms and making her Mrs. Clifford. I never could be hard on a woman, but she has some unpleasant truths to learn, sugar-coat them how I will; but I shirk the meet-

ing, and write her a diplomatic letter expressing my great sorrow, but pointing out in unmistakable terms that the little arrangement she has planned in *les châteaux en Espagne* is quite out of the question, and that the interview she seeks could do no possible good.

CHAPTER IX.

I HAVE glimpsed paradise—I have been with Vera. The union of souls is so heavenly that one is tempted to ask why it is in this world that the consummation of mutual affection that we call marriage cannot always remain blissful. Why should squalling babies, abnormally heavy bills for dresses and millinery, just to out-do that odious Mrs. Parvenu, who lives on the other side of the road, and the consequent squabbles—why should they be necessary concomitants of matrimony? Is it not, and I ask in all humility, that Angelina before marriage will persist in putting the best face on herself, and

turning the best side outwards ? She represents that she is economical, that she can cook divinely, that she will be content with anything if she can only have her Edwin ; while he winks at, nay, even teaches her extravagance, and shows himself the most amiable of created mortals under all possible trials, so that these two, when the first strangeness of possession has worn off, begin to exhibit their natural foibles, which accord as well together as oil and water, and fit like my Hobbs' patent latchkey in an old-fashioned mortice lock. The path of the eligible bachelor is so smooth for him, the outlook is made so fair. Angelina's praises are constantly sung by her mother, who is anxious to see her settled, and by her younger sisters, who are only awaiting her exodus to make their own *débüt*, and the companionship of every day reveals a million blemishes on both sides that have been kept as dark as the manœuvring mother and the

erring bachelor on probation could keep them.

I have been experiencing love in a cottage, that delightful Arcadia, that while it lasts is inimitable—no responsibilities, no unruly servants, and no tax-collector or duns. After the modest quarters in which Vera has installed herself the splendours of Woodsleigh Towers are an unmitigated nuisance ; but I have *savoir vivre* enough to know that that same love in a cottage, in rainy weather, and without Mudie, decent cookery, and sundry other essentials, is the biggest fraud in this or any other century. And yet, while the illusion lasts, find me another source of happiness to touch it. Love indeed gilds the surroundings ; the poet might well write, ‘ For love is heaven, and heaven is love ’ ; and for pure unadulterated bliss, the genuine article, commend me to this.

What greater pleasure can a man enjoy—

for a season—than to minister to the slightest wish of the woman he loves; and who obeys the smallest behest of her lord, and anticipates his little weaknesses—his slippers ready, and his claret at just the correct temperature—better than the little wife in the days when love's young dream has attained fulfilment, and as yet domestic worries, mayhap the *res angustæ domi*, have not assumed the unpleasant prominence that they do afterwards in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred. I suppose it must be so out of Utopia, so let us be logical and imitate the professor, who, struggling with flint and steel, and too rational-minded to swear at the articles themselves, exclaimed: 'Damn the *nature* of things!'

Just now circumstances smile upon us. I am relieved from anxiety about money matters, at all events, for the present. Vera is so sweet that I love her, if possible, more

than when we were harassed by our former troubles, and I find myself thinking that if I were to die, or be doomed to misery in this world for the remainder of my life, the memory of these happy days would bear me cheerfully through it. Vain thought! happiness sought at an unworthy source like this brings its own punishment and wretchedness sooner or later that will not be denied; and though I cannot and will not foresee the shadows that must inevitably fall on us both, my conscience—fancy Don Juan with a conscience!—reminds me of the Americanized version of the aphorism, ‘The mills of God grind slowly, but they pulverize middling fine.’

At present the only cloud on our horizon is Blanche, and what a relief it is to be rid of the Gorgon, as we playfully style her! Edenford well deserves its name. Picturesque, without overawing grandeur, the surrounding

country is an ideal retreat for lovers who are all in all to one another. Lovely glades, where soft breezes penetrate the foliage of the numerous trees, and gentle hills, surrounded with shady winding walks, furnished with rustic seats, give an agreeable change from the sensuous languor that overtakes us in the valleys below, where little rippling streams play a melodious accompaniment to my beloved one's accents, tenderly whispering words of endearment, for true love is always gentle and diffident, and never loud-voiced or assertive. We spend hours like this, talking of our hopes and feelings and plans, until our two natures seem indissolubly welded the one within the other.

The heaven above us is blue, the birds sing merrily, and we are free to enjoy our intercourse undisturbed, for Edenford is not invaded by the rude tripper, or the valetudinarian, or the tourist. Add to this the

romance of our position, the love-light that gilds the daily life of anyone impressionable, picture to yourself my exceeding happiness, and then join with me in sympathizing with the Oriental who pictures heaven as a zenana of never-tiring, moon-faced houris.

But I forbear—I try hard to be cynical as I write, and not sentimental. Picture me the *blasé* man about town rejoicing in the country, picking wild-flowers, splashing water, and pelting Vera with wild roses with almost childish delight. Love is a magician—the ancients might well deify it. It transforms our cottage—it is little more—into a bower of seraphic happiness not to be found or dreamt of in the wicked West End; it renders palatable cookery that I should complain of to the house committee at any club, and generally makes a life I should have thought the very essence of *ennui* a dream of otherwise unapproachable ecstasy.

But the greater the happiness, the sooner it palls, and the greater the abstention, the greater the enjoyment; so let reason step in, and let me hie back to Woodsleigh to keep in touch with events there, and, peradventure too late, rescue letters that may have fallen under the censorship of the crafty Lisette.

Poor little Vera! the parting was terrible, in spite of all my protestations, and her last words drowned in tears at home, for she would not accompany me to the station, were, 'Oh, Bertie, I can't spare you; it is cruel of you to leave me.'

'Nonsense, Vera,' I replied, trying, and not altogether successfully, to preserve my own composure; 'you know it must be, and you cannot doubt me, dearest.'

'No, my darling,' and she clung to me; 'you will come back to me now, but I think of the time when you will go away just like

this, and you will not return ; when as each day passes without you, I shall grow more and more wretched, hoping against hope, until at last the bitter truth forces itself on my mind that I shall see you no more.'

'No, Vera, that day shall never come!' I exclaimed passionately, affected in spite of myself; 'you have trusted me so far, and you shall never, never repent it.'

'Promise me, darling,' she replied, turning her tearful eyes straight up into mine as if she would read my very soul—'promise me solemnly, as you love me now, that when you are tired of me, when the time comes for us to part, you will not write to me loving words while you mean to betray me. Tell me frankly the cruel truth—it will be mercy really, for suspense would be agonizing. Promise to tell me the worst.'

'My dearest,' I replied, looking at her as I might face a *jûge d'instruction*, 'I will contem-

plate such a possibility, and promise you sincerely not to deceive you. I speak earnestly and briefly because you have too much sense to be reassured by honeyed and empty phraseology. Can you read truth in my eyes?’

‘Yes, Bertie, I can; and even now, in the glamour of love, I can judge dispassionately, and I believe—I know you will be true to your word.’

‘Vera darling, and more than that, the day that you fear is far off. Consider how, compelled to leave you at intervals as I shall be, there is no chance of our experiencing that satiety that must come to those, even who love most truly, who are always together. My affection, untrammelled as it is, will wear far better than that that is worn and stretched by daily and hourly intercourse. Love will bind me to you far more effectually than the knowledge that I was compelled to live with

you. Be brave, dearest one, and bear in mind what I have not told you before, and that is that I have settled on you all that I could save from the wreck after my mother's death, and that with an income of over a hundred and fifty per annum you are saved from any actual monetary want.'

'This is too kind of you, you are too generous. I feel as if I would rather not have had it—I would rather have trusted to your generosity. Why did you do this?'

'It was only bare justice on my part,' I replied; and then continued playfully, 'but you will have to be economical, for remember I am coming to share it with you sometimes. So courage, darling, for I must leave you now.'

'Bertie,' she answered in indescribably yearning tones, 'oh, if only I had you!—I don't want the money, but it is like your dear self to give it me; I shall save it all for you.'

I will cheer up. Good-bye, darling, my own, good-bye.'

And so I left her, after seeing that she was well provided with books, for Edenford boasted a circulating library wherein Miss Braddon, Rhoda Broughton, Jane Worboise, and others of that ilk ran riot, and I also induced her to buy painting materials and fancy work, for a man's mind is comprehensive enough to grasp feminine details, and I laughingly said she must work for our future home. I was the more anxious for her to have employment, as I could not safely counsel her to make any friends, for, living a quiet retired life, she would escape those shafts of feminine malice, and that innate and persevering curiosity which is a part of the daughters of Eve everywhere, but which attains its maximum in a quiet country place. So when the inevitable ubiquitous clergyman called, by my advice Vera gave him a courteous but cool reception,

and declined to be drawn in anyway whatever.

I went back to Woodsleigh Towers after this, and did my best to endure Blanche Haviland and her ways ; but it was not a success, for I was pining to be back with my little Vera, so, pleading the business of family matters, after a decent interval, I girded up my loins, and made my way back here in a fever of love's impatience. Things seemed to have gone smoothly at Woodsleigh, and Blanche apparently had no inkling of my past whereabouts or occupation. I hated the deceit, but contented myself with the threadbare reflection that 'all's fair in love and war!'

Arriving at Edenford, Vera was awaiting me on the platform, her face aglow with delight, and she blushinglly whispered to me, as we walked from the station, in accents of intense pleasure :

‘Oh, Bertie, I am so glad to see you again! It is worth all the pain of separation to enjoy the divine happiness of having you to myself again.’

The days have passed only too rapidly, united as we are, and our happiness is so serene and tranquil that there is nothing to tell about it beyond that Vera confided to me that she had had a lover. He was a farmer, and had seen and admired her, and from one letter to her at Woodsleigh, which I quote *in extenso*, it will be seen what a modest, simple, honest, bucolic suitor he was.

‘MY DEAR MISS VERA,

‘You must be aware how much I admire and respect you, and I am writing to ask if you will allow me to pay my addresses to you. I should like to have done so in person, but I am afraid lest you should be ashamed of me amongst

all the grand people where you are now. Believe me, Miss Vera, that I love you with all my heart, and though I am but a rough country chap, I would do my best to make you happy, and I am well enough off that you should never need soil your hands with work. I humbly ask your pardon if I am too presumptuous, but I love you so much that I must know my fate. I shall never love anyone else, and if you will only accept me, you will make the happiest man in Christendom of

‘Your devoted servant,

‘MATTHEW SIMPSON.’

Vera, of course—*cela va sans dire*—had not accepted him, and I have had many a laugh at his expense, while she, good little girl that she is, will not join me, as she respects anything or anybody who is sincere. For myself, I always think life is dull enough, so *vive la bagatelle*, and if I could see a comic side to a passing funeral, I would avail myself of the

opportunity for amusement, though I would be careful not to wound anyone's feelings.

In this instance, Mr. Matthew Simpson was far away, and unconscious of my *persiflage*, so why not let us make merry over him while we can ? I have no cause to fear any rivalry. Matthew is six feet high, so Vera says, broad and strapping, with a red weather-beaten countenance and a most unromantic exterior, while his ideas rarely soar above the price of wheat and the welfare of his stock. Vera would have been as a skylark might feel chained to a log. I am sorry for him. Driving sheep or cursing hinds would be but small distraction to me from unrequited affection, and these are the only consolations his life offers. Just fancy living on a farm with nothing to occupy your thoughts, and having your blighted heart to yourself all the day through !

My pleasant lotus-eating existence and

love's dalliance with Vera were interrupted at last by a letter couched in menacing and peremptory terms from Gladys Nelson. Decidedly this must be put an end to. The idea of a woman's bullying me is too ridiculous. I have not compromised her reputation, or blotted her fair fame, at least in the world's eyes, and why should I be looked on as a sort of refuge for the troublesome destitute? No; if the silken glove failed in its work, I must reveal the iron hand beneath, and put an end once for all to Mrs. Nelson's pretensions. I had nearly forgotten her, and her claims upon me as a pretty and friendless woman are of the slightest. Good heavens! if every woman who was or had been *éprise* with me wanted to marry me, I should have to make tracks for Salt Lake City. Absurd! I, who could not support myself, to marry a penniless woman, and one who, when our liaison was invested with the cloak of sanctity of marriage, might

very possibly return to her old *rôle*, and waste the money I wrested from the tribes of Judah on charity and the heathen, and such-like uninteresting but voracious objects.

So I wrote quietly, but firmly, intimating that Mrs. Nelson was mistaken when she thought it possible for me to fall in with her views, but as she wished it so much, I would meet her by appointment and explain the circumstances. She replied promptly, making the appointment at my chambers, an impudent thing in itself, which appeared to me like an attempt to entangle me in a scene that might compromise her, and so leave only one course open to me—to marry her. But I am so fully determined that I will see her—well, at the bottom of the sea first, that I do not fear the issue, and to-morrow I leave my Vera, and go up to town with a light heart to suppress *la veuve* Nelson and her matrimonial projects upon me.

CHAPTER X.

Now the very fiend take that woman ! Would it had been her instead of the good Boanerges that the Zulus had cremated piecemeal, vivisected, or banqueted off. Mrs. Nelson was not to be suppressed in the gay and airy manner I imagined, and she has developed an alarming strength of character since her husband's death.

Things are going to be rather unpleasant for me, and I am devoutly thankful I always drew myself as a *roué* in the darkest colours to Blanche Haviland, hoping that she might find a few redeeming points that she would cherish and make much of, like the one

lost sheep. Mrs. Nelson threatens, and is quite capable of it, to go to Blanche and enlighten her as to the 'sympathetic friendship' we formed on board ship. So I described it to Blanche in a light nonchalant way. What good Mrs. Nelson will do is hard to say, except to gratify her revenge, and I anticipate considerable amusement from the reception she is likely to get. May I be there to see !

This was what happened at my chambers. I was sitting waiting for her, and while soothing my nerves with seltzer and cognac, I was seriously deliberating whether I had better not have gone unshaved for two or three days, and put on my oldest clothes, so as to make myself as unattractive and dissipated looking as possible, when, punctual to a minute, Mrs. Nelson arrived.

She made a theatrical entry with a little cry of joy, and a rush forward to throw herself

into my arms, which I very carefully evaded, and bowing coldly, planted her in a chair.

She certainly looked very nice, dressed for her part evidently, and the hideous widow's weeds were not too obtrusive. She reminded me of an advertisement of Jay's—a picture in which there is a young and lovely widow, who looks as if she need not remain so long.

Nerved for the interview and charged with an impulsive flow of words—I had nearly said gush—Mrs. Nelson began :

‘ Bertie !—I may call you so now—aren't you glad to see me ?’

‘ Oh yes,’ I answered politely, but not with striking warmth or effusion.

She did not give me time to say any more, but hurried on pleadingly :

‘ Come and sit beside me, *do*, just for the sake of old times. You are almost the only friend I have now, and I want to have you

near me, to feel your presence, and to know that I have someone to protect me. I want to lose my sense of loneliness just for a time. I have been so wretched !’

What was I to do ? and she was directing glances at me as expressively as the most practised coquette. I took the seat beside her, and the pleading of her eyes and manner threw me off my guard for a moment. She laid one little warm hand on mine lovingly, and finally took one in both of hers, pressed it hurriedly to her breast, and proceeded tremulously :

‘ Bertie darling, I have lost (a gulp) Ambrose. Don’t be unkind to me ; I have no one but you now. You used to love me—you swore it.’

‘ Would you have been content with anything less then ?’ I put in rather cynically, though I could have bent over and kissed her, she looked so tempting : and I realized

how fair a creature was offering herself to me body and soul, just for the price—marriage.

She avoided any direct reply to my retort and continued :

‘ Can I not trust you ? You used to say if I were only free, how happy we should have been together. Don’t inflict any more humiliation upon me ; it is hard enough that I should have to approach you like this. Don’t say, oh, don’t say it is in vain ! Remember your promises, every loving word you spoke to me. I am free now ; I love you—I love you better than life itself !’

Mrs. Nelson pronounced the last words in high and thrilling tones, and then burst out crying, and laid her head on my shoulder, her bosom heaving tumultuously.

I hate tears, a woman’s especially, and generally I would have kissed them away, and comforted the troubled fair one with honeyed promises ; but here such a course was

of no use, and I must be cruel to be kind, so I remained quiescent until her sobs abated and I could get a hearing. I had some doubts of the sincerity of all this, and I fancied that my not answering caused her to dry her tears all the sooner. Then I began politely :

‘ My *dear* Mrs. Nelson, what you say is all very true, but unfortunately circumstances have altered, and I am not in a position to fulfil all my promises, or be accountable for everything I said to you. I have no doubt I meant them all at the time, but as I never expected to be taken at my word, perhaps I was rather unguarded. In plain words, and it is best to speak plainly, you have come here hoping to become my wife, and, while I should have been only too overjoyed at such a prospect before, I regret that it is out of the question now, and I feel the more sorry that you should have placed yourself in this position.’

I could see she was listening intently, and, as I paused for a moment, she sobbed convulsively, exclaiming :

‘But dearest (gulp) I love you. Is my love (gulp) to go for nothing?’

‘Do be reasonable,’ I answered suavely; ‘it pains me as much as yourself to have to tell you this, but there are a thousand reasons why I could not marry you. To take only one, I have no means to support a wife.’

‘We could work,’ she interrupted eagerly; ‘my life has been a hard one—I am not afraid of poverty.’

‘Impossible !’ I returned; ‘and even supposing that obstacle surmounted, there are other and more formidable reasons that you know nothing of.’

I paused here, as I did not want to tell her of Blanche and Vera. She reflected for a moment, and then spoke sullenly, if I can

apply such an unpleasant word to so charming a woman.

‘ You no longer love me—there is someone else. I am cast off now.’

‘ You will please remember,’ I replied, ‘ that you were never in any way attached to me, so it is difficult to see how you can be cast off, as you term it. However, if it will satisfy you, I may say that I am engaged ; the match is a decidedly advantageous one for me, and neither in honour nor in inclination could I break it off.’

I spoke coldly and judicially, watching Mrs Nelson all the while. She seemed like a tiger meditating a spring ; but when I had finished, she only turned her tear-stained eyes directly upon me, and in heartrending hysterical tones she said :

‘ Bertie, you cannot mean this ; you cannot be so cruel. I love you ; I am yours. I loved you ; I was false to my husband. Will

you punish me for it ? Think of all we have been to one another ; you are my husband now in everything but name.'

' Hush, my dear !' I urged, trying to calm her ; ' do not excite yourself ; we cannot alter things.'

' But I will speak !' she almost shrieked, ' as there is a God above hears me—miserable woman that I am—I love you ; I will be your slave, your drudge, nay, I will be content to be as the dog at your feet if I may only *belong* to you !'

This was really growing very annoying, and I could not be sure of the truth of her statements. I said I was sorry and pitied her, but I was inflexible. Then her whole nature seemed to change from love to hatred, and when I spoke, perhaps inopportunistly, of assisting her, she exclaimed scornfully :

' Assistance from you ! I ask for love, for

bare justice even, and you would fling me your contemptible charity as if I were a beggar in the street !

The woman seemed transformed into a new creature, and I was fast beginning to understand the quotation, 'Nor hell a fury like a woman scorned.' Good man, that poet ; I wonder if ever he was in a dilemma like this, or whether he had been neglecting the wife of his bosom for some other fair one. Great thoughts wrapped up in finely sounding verbiage often have most prosaic origins.

Mrs. Nelson swept away my feeble attempts at pacification like standing corn before the wind, or King Mob at the Lord Mayor's Show before the prancing steeds of messieurs the mounted police.

She continued tragically :

'But look to yourself, my lost love. I am not a schoolgirl to sit down tamely in

a corner and weep out my heart. If I cannot have love I will have hatred and revenge !'

'My dear Mrs. Nelson,' I interposed firmly, 'you are perfectly at liberty to take any course you think fit, but I must request you to put an end to this scene. Such heroics are quite unnecessary and out of place here, and will not change my resolution in the least.'

'I will go to your betrothed,' she answered furiously ; 'she shall learn the story of your duplicity and will spurn you from her !'

'By all means,' I replied wearily, 'if you wish it, but you will find your own story rather painful in the telling.'

'I care not ; I would willingly confess my own shame to have revenge on you.'

'*Soit,*' I said, chuckling to myself as I thought of Blanche snubbing this fury ; 'and

now, rude as it is, I must ask if you would mind going, as I have another engagement.'

But I did not get rid of her yet ; she was wound up like a clock, and I had to wait until she ran down ; but I provoked her more than anything by pretending not to pay attention, even as on one memorable occasion Beaconsfield is said to have driven Gladstone to the verge of lunacy by pretending to sleep through his most impassioned diatribe.

At last, however, she departed after hurling a few more menaces and reproaches at my unfortunate head, and I sat down to consider the situation.

Blanche Haviland she did not know, but I supposed it would be easy for her to find out who my *fiancée* was and all about her. Next she would probably go to her, and here I laughed outright as I thought of the encouraging reception my cold proud Blanche—herself a model of probity and virtue—would

give to Mrs. Nelson's recital of her wrongs, especially as, to make it effective, she must confess her own discreditable share.

And for this she would know what to expect, for women are always so tender and tolerant to the faults of morality in their own sex ; they, even the religious ones, are so kind and charitable and ready to take the lost one back into the fold again, and reinstate her and forget her sin. Oh yes, they never have scornful looks, they never—oh, never!—turn aside as if from contamination from some unhappy creature, whose only fault was that she trusted too much and was deceived.

Shall I speak to Blanche first and so discount the effect of Mrs. Nelson's interview? No ; if she chooses to be unpleasant about a little thing like that, she may, and be hanged to her. I have done nothing to contravene the outward and visible regulations of society. I am not on trial in court, that I may be con-

victed out of a woman's mouth, as in a famous case not so long since. Naturally, of course, I shall represent to Blanche that Mrs. Nelson is a wicked designing woman, but that is the utmost trouble I will take.

Woodsleigh Towers.

I am here again, and Blanche is so affectionate, I really feel ashamed of myself. I love Vera with all my heart, and yet Blanche has improved and grown more tender and less stately, but she will relapse into her old stiffness soon, when the bombshell Mrs. Nelson lands in our midst, for which event I am waiting calmly, for I am indifferent as to the issue. It is sweet to contemplate being wealthy, and no more sixty per cent. transactions; it is pleasant to enjoy the kudos of being Blanche's affianced husband; but I feel as if I could give it all up, and settle down and work—yes, actually work for my little

Vera. My brain must be softening, I fear, but there is a new and strange charm about the idea.

Blanche is looking forward to our speedy marriage, and I, hypocrite that I feel under her caresses, have to evade the subject as best I can, even so far as to risk her displeasure. To arrange for *les nocces*, and then have Mrs Nelson appearing, would make my conduct appear all the more perfidious, so I must temporize, be my excuses and subterfuges never so lame.

That imp of a Lisette has got some game on hand, I am sure. Whenever I meet her there is a malicious trickery in her face such as you might see in a monkey who has just stolen and secreted something, and she pursues her giddy way without stopping for a moment. I am sure she is up to something. What can it be? She is devoted to Blanche, and in spite of my efforts at propitiation does not

seem to like me. Well, what matters? I am sick of this life and its deceptions. If the worst comes to the worst, I will take Vera away somewhere and work—positively earn my bread by the sweat of my brow.

En voiture for the backwoods, let us say, and I, the *flâneur par excellence*, will dig, and hoe, and plough, anything so long as I can have my Vera to smile on my labours. I feel like a traveller in the desert thirsting for a draught of pure cool spring water, and who is offered a flask of eau-de-cologne, millefleurs, or some other high-scented artificial mixture. Vera and a cottage *versus* Blanche and a mansion. The former has it, but the roses on the ideal trellis would soon fade, and the romance once gone, beer would not quite come up to my favourite *crû* of Pommery. What a pity wisdom and experience always have something to throw in the track of the macadam of Hades—good intentions !

CHAPTER XI.

PELION on Ossa, complication on complication ! Come on, all my deadly sins and crush me, and may the devil take the hindmost, and, for that matter, all of you ! And may Lisette especially be Anathema Maranatha. Truly I was a prophet when I spoke of her as an *intrigante* ; but the deep-laid plot that hussy has contrived for me I was far from suspecting. I wish to goodness the Monroe doctrine could be made compulsory on private individuals, and people would mind their own business.

Lisette accosted me last night on my way to the smoking-room, and there was a trium-

phant expression of gratified malice about her features that I did not like.

‘Meestare Clifford, pardon, saire, I have found something that is yours.’

Naturally I inquired what it was, and when she extracted it from her pocket, the something proved to be a dilapidated railway-label, carefully and artistically mounted on half a sheet of note-paper. There was not much of the original remaining, but what there was contained the fatal letters EDE . . . RD, enough evidence, in fact, to hang anyone.

My first impulse was to snatch it from her hand, but, as that would have been tantamount to an admission of guilt, I restrained myself, and, with an uneasy laugh, I remarked with feigned composure, ‘Is it? It may be. Why do you show it to me?’

Lisette’s malignity burst out and overpowered her, and she hissed in cat-like fashion :

‘*Mon Dieu !* Why ? you ask, *vaurien* that you are ! Mees Haviland, my mistress, loves you ; you are *fiancé*, and at Edenford is living Mees Marchmont as your wife ! Bah, *traître !* Mees Haviland has no eyes, but, *pour moi, pas si bête !* But I weel tell her all, and she shall throw you away like that !’ and she made a contemptuous gesture with her hands.

I had had no chance of interrupting her, so eager was she to deliver these sentences, but as soon as she came to a full stop, I interposed.

‘ Really, Lisette, this is too absurd. Carry your ridiculous suspicions to Miss Haviland or whoever you please, but don’t annoy me with them.’

‘ So, monsieur, you deny it. You are cool now, but *nous verrons*.’

‘ Nonsense, Lisette ; don’t trouble your pretty little head about such things.’

‘ But it is true, you know it is,’ she re-

torted viciously, with a toss of her head, and stamping a decidedly shapely foot.

Grandes dames must think what a pity it is that good looks, small waists, hands and feet are not confined to the heaven-born, aristocratic classes.

I assumed a gaiety I was far from feeling, and replied :

‘ Bah, Lisette ! what is true, and what isn’t ? As the man said, “ You never can tell.” *Vive la bagatelle*, as you would say ; and, see, take this’—I gave her half a sovereign—‘ go and buy some *chiffons*, and now give me a kiss for it. You look a hundred times more charming when you are smiling than like this ;’ and I made a face that I have found effective when I have been left alone with a troublesome child.

She took the money—trust her for that—and her innate coquetry made her assume a saucy expression. She was evidently molli-

fied at the compliment, and, to my surprise, laid one hand on my arm, and kissed me warmly in return. The touch of cherry, pouting lips is always agreeable, and I might have stayed indulging in further pleasantries if Blanche's high-pitched, clear, carefully-modulated voice had not made itself heard summoning Lisette.

I went to my dressing-room, and there was the portmanteau I had used on my last expedition to Edenford, with every label carefully washed off. To the devil with the little schemer! I thought, but what could I do? As long as she was silent it was clearly my best policy to remain so too, but then, how long was she to be trusted? Offering to bribe her was risky, as it would be clear evidence of my culpability; what other means could I take? Happy thought! She is vain; flattery may attack her in a susceptible part, and I will make love to her.

I fancy I can do a little execution in that way, but woe is me if Blanche should discover me.

Nor is this all. A well-meaning, but blundering, awkward idiot has been to add to my embarrassment about things in general and Vera in particular. I have done battle with this new enemy and routed him for the time being, although he will return to the attack.

This morning one of the footmen came to me. He was a man whom I particularly detested for the confoundedly insolent air he assumed to everybody except his mistress—she was the only one he had any respect for, to judge from his manner. It is difficult to stand bumptiousness from your equals and superiors, but when it comes from a menial, whose only recommendations are his height and the size of his calves, it is unbearable.

Bearing on his face a grin, which it would

have been a joy to dispel with a good hearty kicking, he approached me with a card held daintily between his great red fingers, as if he were afraid of soiling them. Such a card too, not a Bond Street production, by any means, but an 'in this style 50 for 1s.' pasteboard, bought on a cheap trip probably to the Metropolis.

'Someone to see you, sir,' the flunkey remarked, with as little courtesy as possible. 'Says as how if you can't see him now he will wait till you can.'

'Who the deuce is it?' I asked impatiently, taking the card.

'Can't say, sir; no one as 'as anything to do with the 'ouse or the other gentlemen.' This with a supercilious air.

'How do you know?' I asked sharply, fixing him at the same time sternly with my eye, whereat he turned if possible a shade more florid, and stammered sheepishly :

‘ ‘E doesn’t look like it at all ; ‘e’s not——.’

I had made myself master of the name—Matthew Simpson—by this, and, remembering it was Vera’s rustic admirer, I thought it better not to bring him into the house, so I said rudely, cutting the footman short, for it is the only way to treat these specimens of humanity :

‘ There, that will do. Where is Mr. Simpson ?’

‘ At the servants’ entrance, sir,’ Jeames now answered quite meekly.

‘ Very well,’ I said ; ‘ take him into the shrubbery, and say that as it’s a fine day I’ll join him there in a minute or two.’

A minute or two for reflection. What does he know ? I am not accountable to him. A menace in his message. Pshaw ! I gird myself in a triple armour of politeness and *bonhomie*, and make for the shrubbery.

I see Mr. Simpson. Ah, Vera ! you may

have lost a big, honest, trusting heart ; but, by Jove ! as far as personal appearance goes, I have the advantage of my rustic rival. He is so very countrified to look at, I should laugh, but I don't want to wound his feelings ; and, after all, do we not both love Vera ? I will be gentle with him. Tall, big-boned, ungainly is he, with monstrous feet, and that aggrieved, heavy, sulky look so characteristic of the farm-labourer.

I advance, smiling graciously, as if there was no such thing as *mauvais honte* in the world, and I hold out my hand, saying :

‘ Good-morning, Mr. Simpson. Splendid weather we are having. What can I do for you ? ’

He retired a few paces as gracefully as any *percheron* backing a heavy load, and replied, not ungraciously :

‘ You'll excuse me, Mr. Clifford, sir, but I

can't take your hand until I know something I have come to ask you.'

'Certainly, my good man ; please yourself,' I replied airily. 'It is quite a matter of indifference to me.'

'I'll thank you not to call me your good man either,' he replied moodily.

What a bear ! Where would diplomacy be if all our phrases had to express exactly what we meant and thought ? I only answered testily :

'Well, what do you want ?'

'That's better—that's straight,' he replied, with grim approval. 'That's soon told. What have you done with Vera—with Miss Marchmont ?'

'What have I done with Miss Marchmont ?' I repeated slowly, to gain time, and looking him unblushingly in the face, while I endeavoured to seem surprised at the question. 'What have I got to do with Miss March-

mont ? I'm not her guardian or her keeper. Are you out of your senses ?

'No, I'm not,' he replied gruffly ; 'but I fear she was, poor girl, when she trusted herself in the hands of a man like you. I have heard all about you and your goings on, and what sort of a man you are to any woman who gets in your power.'

'Come, Mr. Simpson,' I interposed sharply, 'we are not here to discuss my private or public character. If you have nothing better to do, I can assure you I have, and I shall leave you to yourself.'

'You won't tell me then,' he answered aggressively, 'where she is ?'

'Where who is ?' I replied impatiently.

'You know very well who I mean !' he retorted angrily. 'Vera Marchmont.'

'I know nothing whatever of her,' I replied, angry in my turn.

'Then you are a liar !'

His voice was rising, and I trusted no one was near ; but all along he had spoken quietly, though with a bitter intensity, fearing, like a shy man, to proclaim his own and Vera's wrongs to the world.

I felt all the indignation that anyone would feel under the circumstances, but I was still cool enough to count up all my chances and appreciate them at their true worth. Naturally I ought, and every nerve in my body was urging me, to knock him down. Though he was much bigger and heavier than I was, I should have come off victorious at the finish, I have no doubt whatever ; but at what price should I have gained the victory ? Perhaps the loss of a few teeth and a black eye—rather awkward occurrences to explain away at any time, but especially so in someone else's house, and to Blanche of all people, for to her anything approaching pugilism was the *ne plus ultra* of vulgar barbarism. So, although my

whole manhood revolted, I decided to pocket the affront, rather than risk appearing before her with the traces of fighting about me, for it was impossible for me to leave the Towers at present on any pretext, as I had been away so much with Vera. Not that I cared very much about Blanche and her opinion ; but then there was Lisette, one mine ready to blow up under my feet, and a fight with this country lout and explanations afterwards might be the match to explode it. So I decided to temporize for expediency's sake, although I have reproached myself with cowardice all the rest of this day.

All these thoughts flashed through my brain with the rapidity of lightning, and when I had instantly chosen my line of action, I replied scornfully, shrugging my shoulders :

‘ That is quite sufficient, I have stayed too long. Perhaps when you want me again you

will condescend to learn ordinary politeness.'

'Politeness, you black-hearted villain ! D—— you ! can't I insult you ? Are you a coward as well as everything else that is bad ?' he said furiously.

This was too much ; I went cold with rage and a murderous feeling, but I replied with studied calmness :

'You have said enough and more than enough. If we were on other soil, you should eat your words or die for them. What is it you want ?'

'Satisfaction !' he hissed. 'I want to wring the life out of you. I want my knee on your throat while you ask pardon of me and the God above us for the girl you have wronged.'

This was growing too melodramatic a situation, considering the proximity of the house, and burning with rage as I was, I knew one of us must keep cool.

I determined to calm him by that most effectual of douches, cold common sense, so I said sneeringly, baring my arm, which was muscular, and had held its own many a time before : ‘ And if I offered you satisfaction, are you sure you would come off best, and if you did, would it help you, would you be any nearer the object of your hopes, the Miss Marchmont who has rejected you? If you were to kill me, would she love you any better ?’

‘ No, God help me, she wouldn’t,’ he replied despairingly, and I knew the battle was won, ‘ and I am mad for love of her ;’ but relapsing into his old fierceness, he continued : ‘ But I would crush the breath out of you, and feel I was avenging her and doing a good action, though I swung for it afterwards !’

Now was the time to finish him quietly, but surely, and I said :

‘I may or may not be what you have called me. I don’t think I am, and nothing would please me better than to give you the satisfaction you seek, if I could do so as a gentleman, but I am not a butcher that we should settle our differences like two prize-fighters. Therefore I warn you that there are men within call, and if you intend any violence, I shall simply summon them and have you removed from the grounds. If you have anything to say, I shall be glad to hear it quietly, but upon any recurrence of the absurd tragical style you assumed just now, I shall leave you at once.’

The conquest was complete, for, laying a hand upon my arm, Simpson became imploring, almost tearful, which in so big a man struck me as decidedly ludicrous.

Then he said :

‘Don’t go like that, sir. I ask your pardon, if I spoke too strongly, but my love

drove me frantic. Don't take my little Vera away from me. A gentleman like you can have plenty of light o' loves ; spare me the one girl I love, my little darling, my Vera. Poor little lamb ! wherever she is, however she is despised and disgraced, my arms are always ready and open to welcome and protect her. You have loved, yourself, sometime, sir, I make no doubt, and perhaps in vain. Can't you feel for me ? Be merciful to her, as you hope for mercy yourself !'

The man had lost all his boorishness now, and was pleading like a mother for the life of her first-born. I have a soft heart—I wonder whether I can call it a redeeming feature in myself—and remembering how I loved Vera myself, I could not help yielding to my feelings, and I said :

‘ I forgive you freely all you have said. I have been in love, and I have suffered, but I can give you no hope. Vera does not love

you, and much as she might respect you, as I do now since you have opened your heart to me, there is not the slightest chance of her ever becoming yours. It is only kindness to tell you so at once.'

Unheeding what I said, Simpson broke in fiercely :

'Then you do know where she is ; you are her betrayer ; you have——'

'Hush !' I said, 'or I leave you.'

'Tell me, then,' he inquired eagerly, 'tell me truly, as if you were answering at the judgment day, is she well and happy ?'

'On my honour,' I replied emphatically and briefly, 'as I love her with my whole heart and soul, she is.'

'As you love her with your whole heart and soul,' he repeated wonderingly ; 'then she must be your *wife* ?'

I hesitated, but finally decided to tell the truth, feeling more guilty in the presence of

this honest simple-minded soul than I had ever done before.

‘No, she is not.’

‘Then you are going to make her your wife?’

‘Not—at—present;’ I almost faltered, but recovering myself, I said briskly : ‘Simpson, you are a good fellow ; can you keep a secret ?’

He answered dramatically :

‘As long as I know you have her welfare at heart, your secret is safe with me. Betray her, and I will betray you, and follow you to the end of the earth for revenge.’

‘Yes, yes, that will do,’ I answered impatiently ; comedy, and not drama, is to my taste. ‘Keep my secret, for I shall always love and care for her. The truth is, I am married already, but my wife has been false to me, and I am seeking my freedom. When I get it, I shall marry Vera.’

‘But where is she—what is she doing?’

‘I have trusted you, now you must trust me. Accept my assurance that Vera is comfortable, that she is happy, that she is well provided for in every way—in fact, she is everything you could wish her to be.’

‘Except,’ he interrupted angrily, ‘that she is your mistress. I may be a fool beside you, with your wicked London ways, but I know she cannot be all that without being more to you than she ought to be.’

‘Shame on you,’ I answered seriously, ‘that you are the first one to cast a stone at the woman you love, when you ought to cherish and uphold her fair fame. I have an aunt who knows of my unfortunate marriage, and Vera is safe with her.’

‘I wish I could think so,’ he interjected gloomily.

‘You are not very flattering, my friend,’ I replied; ‘but stay—I will convince you. If

you will come here again, say in ten days, I will give you a letter from Vera herself, bearing out all I have told you.'

'I will come for certain,' he answered ; and soon after we parted friends, or shall I say enemies who had agreed for the nonce to bury the hatchet ?

Heigho ! I sigh as I finish writing all this, which is really much harder work than getting through the interview. I wonder whether my pretended marriage will serve me eventually. It certainly seemed a trump card at the time, and sent Simpson away contented, if not exactly rejoicing ; but big lies like this are edged tools to play with. I wonder who has put him on the scent. Surely not Lisette ; and yet she knows Vera's hiding-place.

And besides Lisette and this countryman, I have still Mrs. Nelson in prospect to reckon with. Oh, for the wings of a dove, or rather a

big steam yacht, to fly away, and leave them to fight it out! What Blanche would say if she only knew all, I don't care to think!

CHAPTER XII.

A week later.

ONE of the storms has burst! Mrs. Nelson has been here, and I hope she feels better and more satisfied ; I shouldn't in her place. It always amuses me intensely to see how thoroughly nasty women can be with one another—how they have a thousand little underhand ways of hitting below the belt, with expressions, insinuations, and innuendoes that a man would never dream of, or if he did, would scorn to avail himself of. Women are curious creatures—lovable to the other sex, to whom they turn their sweetest and best side, but amongst themselves full of petty jealousies,

spite, and maliciousness. They will spar with one another apparently for no purpose but to hurt one another's feelings; and still, when they part, they will kiss and be the best of friends.

Not that Mrs. Nelson's interview with Blanche was of the gentle or sparring type—not much of that about it; more of the fair give and take, rough and tumble. Even Blanche lost a little of her habitual coolness and courtesy at the idea of Mrs. Nelson obtruding her shameless presence on her outraged pride and virtue; and now, true to her sex, my betrothed refers to her as a 'person' and a 'creature,' with a contemptuous inflection in her voice, that really means 'that abandoned, disgraceful woman.'

I did not even know Mrs. Nelson had arrived when one afternoon Blanche sent a message, asking to see me at once. Never thinking but that it was some trifling service

she required of me—to hold some wool, or perhaps read to her—I went to her boudoir without any idea of what was coming. When I saw Mrs. Nelson I knew all, but I was utterly reckless and indifferent. I felt sorry for Blanche: it was really painful for her if she loved me; but, after all, perhaps it was better ended. I had the utmost contempt for Mrs. Nelson, as I would for any woman who would trade on her own shame, who would use it for the purpose of revenge, and blazon it forth without any compunction to serve her own ends. I remember laughing to myself as I thought how often I had assured Blanche I was unworthy of her; then I bowed smilingly to Mrs. Nelson, and, sitting down, turned to Blanche.

She began in much less calm tones than usual:

‘I thought it best to send for you that you might acknowledge the truth or untruth of the

allegations that this—this person has made against you. I should not like to condemn you unheard.'

'My dear Blanche,' I interposed airily, 'I have nothing to say to you which I wish Mrs. Nelson to hear, so that, although I highly appreciate your sense of justice'—this ironically—'I must decline to make any remarks whatever.'

It was no use. If I had to eat humble-pie eventually, I was not going to be dragged at Mrs. Nelson's chariot-wheels; and, moreover, I reflected that the more meek and humble attitude I assumed to Blanche, the more she would lord it over me; while, if I stood my ground and showed independence—and she really did love me—I should stand a better chance of keeping well with her. After all, if we parted, what matter? I am sick of the engagement. I am Bohemian to the backbone, and I never should be able to exist—to

breathe, I had almost said—chained to that pattern of propriety, that frigid crystallization of all the virtues upon the society automaton.

‘Then you admit knowing Mrs. Nelson?’ Blanche replied, almost catching at my words, as if too glad to convict me out of my own mouth, and for which I registered a mental vow to be even with her.

‘Oh yes,’ I answered; ‘I know her too well. It is easy to do so, considering how plainly she reveals her true character. I suppose you have heard her story?’

‘Certainly, Mr. Clifford,’ interposed Mrs. Nelson vindictively. ‘I have not spared you; you may be quite sure of that! I have shown you in your true colours!’

‘Then I can only hope, Blanche,’ I said lazily, ‘for your sake, that Mrs. Nelson has not inflicted so much of her tragic talent upon you as she did upon me, or you must be terribly bored.’

‘I have heard Mrs. Nelson’s story,’ replied Blanche with hauteur, ‘and a more shocking one I am thankful to say I never listened to. But this is mere fencing with the question. Do you admit what she charges you with? for if you do, it is needless for me to say all is over between us from this moment.’

Mrs. Nelson’s face here lighted up with gratified malice, and her lips moved as if murmuring exultingly to herself.

Was I going to allow her this triumph of seeing me cast off? Not exactly, so looking Blanche straight in the face, I said, ‘Pardon me, but, as I said before, I have no intention of discussing this or any other question in Mrs. Nelson’s presence.’

‘Yes, and why, Miss Haviland?’ broke in Mrs. Nelson; ‘because he cannot face me. When I am gone he will make you believe anything.’

Blanche smiled a cruel judicial smile, and

said proudly, 'I am not so weak-minded as you deem me. The truth or falseness of your story must be easy to ascertain. The shameless way in which you have made your avowal convinces me that you would be capable of any means, however base, to gain your ends, whatever they may be.'

'I would indeed,' she interposed eagerly, 'to punish that villain!'

I smiled as aggravatingly as I could, and Blanche said freezingly, 'I must remind you that I am not accustomed to hear this sort of thing, and you must moderate your language, unless you wish me to ring for the servants.'

Mrs. Nelson was losing her temper, and she said sneeringly, 'It's no use, apparently; you are all against me; but if you won't be convinced, I wish you joy of your husband. Mr. Clifford will be so faithful, so true! I have learnt all about it! A liaison with me while he was engaged to you, while your

kisses were yet warm on his lips, your farewells still lingering in his ear. I would answer for it he has half a dozen illicit amours on his hands now, did we but know !

‘ This is insufferable !’ interrupted Blanche, whose patience was exhausted ; and turning to me she said, with stiff politeness, ‘ Will you have the goodness to ring the bell ?’

I complied with pleasure, but Mrs. Nelson had not yet come to the end of her venom, and she continued for my benefit : ‘ Mark my words, Bertie Clifford, whether that blind fool is convinced or not, you have not done with me ; I will cross your path and thwart you through life. You shall repent the day you refused me !’

‘ I don’t think so,’ I answered sweetly, ‘ if this is a specimen of your average conduct. At present I feel most devoutly thankful.’

The maid arrived just then. I feared a scene, but Mrs. Nelson departed quietly, for which I

felt grateful, as I knew Blanche's horror of any such scandal. Now for the tug of war!

Blanche and I sat facing one another for a minute or two in silence, she no doubt considering what she should say to me, and I for my part stubbornly making up my mind not to give way in a single point. I was not married yet, and was accountable to no one, legally at least, since Boanerges had found a grave, perhaps in the maw of a cannibal. Whether I lost Blanche or not I recked little. Guilty, I ought to, and did feel, but I revolted against the idea of this proud beauty assuming the right to control my freedom or my actions, be they never so bad, until marriage gave it her.

At length she opened fire. 'Bertie—I may not call you so much longer—you have often told me you were unworthy of me, and while I never believed your jesting speeches—what woman would?—I have sometimes pictured

them true, but never, never did I imagine you capable of anything like this.'

'No?' I said lightly and interrogatively, 'but you see we all have unpleasant lessons to learn.'

'You own the truth, then, of this disgusting story?' Blanche asked with pained surprise, as if she expected me to deny it. 'You can sit here in my presence,' she went on impatiently, 'and acknowledge yourself guilty of all that that dreadful woman accused you of?'

I bowed assent, for I felt conscience-stricken. Why should I defend myself? Mrs. Nelson might have embroidered the details, but the main facts were indisputable, and I was too proud to lie about them.

'And have you nothing to urge in extenuation?' Blanche went on with rising voice and growing anger; 'nothing to mitigate your treachery to me, and your sin against this woman and her husband? It is too much!

I feel the degradation of polluting my lips by the mere mention of it!’

‘Then I shall be glad if you will drop the subject,’ I replied flippantly. ‘You may be sure it has even less charm for me than for you.’

‘You will say nothing?’ she urged; ‘have you no thought for me? Are you condemned without being able to offer a single word in palliation of the evil you have done?’

‘Of what use is it my saying anything?’ I answered, touched by her reproaches. ‘I cannot defend myself without putting the blame on to Mrs. Nelson’s shoulders. I have no grounds for doing so, and if I had, I would not. The fault is mine, and I must take the consequences. I might remind you that I am neither a co-respondent in the witness-box nor your husband, but I have sufficient respect for you to be deeply sorry for what has occurred—perhaps I ought to say for being

found out. Such stories are too common in my world—aye, and after marriage as well as before—for me to attach the importance to this that you do. To me it was a passing flirtation, the recreation of a holiday, with most unfortunately an embarrassing ending ; to you it is a serious fault, a crime, even. We think differently. I have often said how unworthy I was of you. It is the old story of the earthenware pot setting itself amongst its superiors, the brazen ones.'

'Indeed !' Blanche said scornfully ; 'so to you it is a mere *contretemps*. You have no regard for my feelings, my wounded self-respect, my betrayed faith in you, my——'

'You wrong me there,' I interposed. 'I regret what has happened deeply, but why go into that? What is past is past. We have the present and the future to face. I deserve your anger too well, but what good purpose will it serve for you to vent it on me? In

your eyes I have forfeited all claim to your love and your esteem. Your reproaches cannot make me feel any more penitent than I do, looking at my conduct from your standpoint. Give me the *coup de grâce*, and let me go !'

'If you no longer loved me'—this with a suspicion of faltering in Blanche's angry tones—'would it not have been more upright, more manly, more kind to have told me so, and asked for your release? Why should you have gone on deceiving me only to bind yourself irrevocably ?'

'You will do me the justice to remember that I have never pressed on our marriage, that I have always doubted my fitness to become the husband of one I admired and respected so much,' I said persuasively.

'Then you never really loved me?' she asked earnestly, as if the thought troubled her.

‘I have never said or meant that for a moment,’ I replied hastily.

Blanche showed signs of relenting, and a patched-up peace is better than none.

‘What do you wish me to believe—why not tell me frankly?’

‘My dear Blanche,’ I replied, ‘what can I say? If I assure you that I have never ceased to love you, you will assume a cold, superior smile of incredulity. (Not but what you are perfectly justified in anything you may think of me.) My *affaire* with Mrs. Nelson, that I thought so venial an offence, did not affect my feelings towards you for a moment, or should I not have hastened to make her my wife when the opportunity arose?’

‘You mean to say,’ Blanche replied, in yielding but unbelieving tones, ‘that while you are engaged to me, you can make love to another woman, that you can—you can—I

can't repeat the disgraceful details, and still pretend it makes no difference in your love for me ?'

' Believe me or not—I can't expect you to, but that is the truth,' I answered dispassionately—' my affection for you has never altered. I confessed my share in this business freely enough—why should I lie to you now ?'

I thought to myself with grim amusement, ' What I am saying is true enough.' My affection for Blanche had indeed never altered, but the words were unintentional.

' You love me yet ?' she rejoined in faltering accents. ' Bertie, you have nearly broken my heart ; how can I believe you ?'

Poor Blanche ! she had not so much strength of mind as I thought, and I made a mental note that the nonchalant method is the best in dealing with these cases. I draw a veil over the remainder of the scene. We patched up a sort of reconciliation, though I grudged her

the kisses that ought to have been Vera's. I am getting to despise myself more and more. Why should I keep up this farce any longer ? I do not want to marry Blanche ; what is it I am afraid of losing ? I hardly know—it must be wealth or kudos ; there is some lingering feeling that impels me to remain on good terms with her. Yet it is not fair to her ; but, then, if I am to turn good and do unto others as I would be done by, there are more serious sins on my conscience that I ought to put an end to as a commencement. I shall let things slide. *Væ victis*, and surely Blanche has enough of self-respect to be able to take care of herself.

Fancy if there were to be no flirtations, no love without matrimonial intentions, between the opposite sexes ; if everything were *au sérieux*, and a request for a kiss was tantamount to a proposal of marriage ! What a lot of enjoyment we men should lose, and

le beau sexe too ! Girls, I know, are always on the look-out for chances, and are therefore somewhat mercenary, but still sometimes their hearts are involved as well as their heads ; and when the blush deepens on Angelina's face, and with drooping eyelids she sinks into impecunious Edwin's arms at the first dawn of love, even though marriage may be an impossibility between them, will you tell me that these halcyon heavenly moments, oases in the Sahara of this work-a-day world, and marking epochs in a maiden's mind, had better be done away with, because the dreams will never be realized ? Perish the thought !

' 'Tis better to have loved and lost
Than never to have loved at all,'

sings the poet ; and he might have added that in some cases it was better to lose than gain your lover. Let us picture

Angelina married, grown old, thin, and shrewish—thanks to four or five hungry mouths to feed on almost nothing. Edwin, torn with anxiety at business, and with no peace at home, straightway betakes himself to drink ; and Angelina, thinking over the pleasant placid hours at home she was so anxious to exchange for the gnawing worries of marriage in straitened circumstances, will regretfully agree with me.

If I were to preach infanticide in cold blood, as superfluous puppies and kittens are killed off, a howl of horror would arise, and comparisons would be made between me and Herod, in the latter's favour. If I preach Malthus at you, mothers of large, struggling families, I shall be worse, I shall be 'improper.' Yet I will rest on the evil for a moment. In my own set how many men have I seen fairly brilliant, promising, and with good prospects !

They have taken unto themselves wives, and where are they now ? Struggling, hampered, with never a five-pound note to spare, they and their wives growing old and gaunt and worn with the toil and anxiety of keeping up appearances ; and the struggle to make ends meet streaking their hair and lining their features. The erstwhile young, pretty, and light-hearted girl has grown into the faded drab, with not a thought or an ambition beyond making the weekly pittance for house-keeping satisfy the manifold claims upon it. Surrounding her is an army of unruly children with seemingly enormous appetites, and an infinite capacity for wearing out clothes.

Is it merciful, is it right, is it justice that these things should be so ? A child in the abstract is, or ought to be, a thing of beauty and a joy for ever ; that is, until in the concrete it grows up and breaks your heart by making

a dreadful *mésalliance*, as the case may be, or elopes with someone's wife, or brings your gray hairs in sorrow to the grave with cards, or drink, or betting.

END OF VOL. I.

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